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# Seeing the Palm Trees Again

Jie Wang

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SEEING THE PALM TREES AGAIN

A TRANSLATION, ANALYSIS, AND COMMENTARY

by  
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Bachelor of Arts, Lanzhou University, 1982

Master of Arts, University of North Dakota, 1984

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

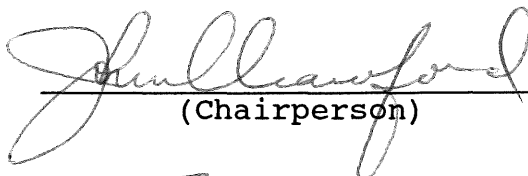
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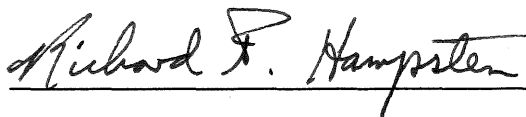


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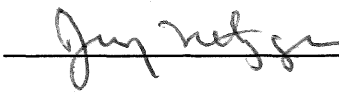
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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
ABSTRACT .....	vi
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER ONE .....	37
CHAPTER TWO .....	56
CHAPTER THREE .....	74
CHAPTER FOUR .....	93
CHAPTER FIVE .....	112
CHAPTER SIX .....	134
CHAPTER SEVEN .....	152
CHAPTER EIGHT .....	176
CHAPTER NINE .....	194
CHAPTER TEN .....	214
CHAPTER ELEVEN .....	233
CHAPTER TWELVE .....	251
CHAPTER THIRTEEN .....	269
CHAPTER FOURTEEN .....	285
CHAPTER FIFTEEN .....	304
CHAPTER SIXTEEN .....	322
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN .....	340
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN .....	358
CHAPTER NINETEEN .....	378
CHAPTER TWENTY .....	396
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	415

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## ABSTRACT

A translation, analysis, and commentary on Seeing the Palm Trees Again, a highly regarded novel in contemporary Chinese fiction by Chinese-American novelist Lihua Yu, are presented. The novel is about a trip home by a professor of Chinese who has lived in the United States for ten years. It depicts the attitude of common Chinese people toward sending their children to America. It also describes the life of Chinese students in the United States. In creating the character of Tianlei Moe, the author has said what many people in Tianlei's situation feel but are reluctant to express openly: the feeling of rootlessness, the desire to be understood, and the endless search for one's true identity. The reasons for selecting this novel are trifold. The first is the author's detailed and accurate observation of the minds of Chinese students in the United States and her ability to portray them in a true-to-life manner in her fiction. The second is that Lihua Yu's Chinese style is readable and pleasant, largely because she has successfully incorporated Western syntax into Chinese, bringing a fresh, vigorous feel to her works. The third reason is that this novel is widely read in China and among Chinese people overseas. The book is useful for a Western audience to understand the background and life of Chinese intellectuals in America, especially at a time when more and more Chinese students come to the United States for

higher education.

A discussion of the problems encountered during the translation process is provided, including topics such as making choices between retaining expressions that are peculiar to the Chinese language and replacing them with equivalent ones in English, treatment of kinship terms and names of food items, rendition of words whose meanings are broad or vague, linguistic gaps, translation of idiomatic expressions, use of verb tenses, and consideration of cultural elements and associative meanings. In addition, the problem of verifying quality in translation is addressed.

## INTRODUCTION

Lihua Yu is one of the most influential writers in contemporary Chinese fiction. She deals realistically with the theme of Chinese intellectual exiles, a subject that draws great interest from the Chinese public both at home and abroad. Her best-known work, Seeing the Palm Trees Again, is worth translating into English for three main reasons. The first is the author's detailed and accurate observation of the minds of Chinese intellectuals in the United States and her ability to portray them in a true-to-life manner in her fiction. Second, Lihua Yu's Chinese style is readable and pleasant, because she has successfully incorporated Western syntax into Chinese, bringing a fresh, vigorous feel to her works. Third, this novel is widely read in China and among Chinese people overseas. The book is thus useful to a Western audience in understanding the background and life of Chinese intellectuals in America, especially at a time when more and more Chinese students come to the United States for higher education.

Lihua Yu's familiarity with her subjects is evident in her writing. In fact, the author is a part of the people whom she writes about in her stories. Born in Shanghai, China, in 1931, she moved with her family to Taiwan in 1947. She witnessed the tragedy that World War II brought to China and the subsequent separation of Taiwan from the mainland. In

Seeing the Palm Trees Again, she describes such scenes and shows the longing of people on both sides of the Taiwan Strait for China's reunification. In 1953, Lihua Yu graduated from Taiwan University with a major in history. In the following year, she began graduate studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, obtaining an M.A. in journalism in 1956. In the same year, she won the Samuel Goldwyn Creative Writing Award for her short story in English "Sorrow at the End of the Yangtze River," which appeared in Uclan magazine. In 1967, she won the Chia Hsin Literary Award in Taiwan for Seeing the Palm Trees Again, and in 1984-85, she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to carry on scholarly exchanges with writers in Yugoslavia. She currently teaches Chinese literature at the State University of New York at Albany.

Lihua Yu's earlier works, notably Seeing the Palm Trees Again, focus on self-exiled Chinese (Taiwanese) intellectuals in America. They include Recollections of River Ch'ing, a novel (1962); Homecoming, a collection of short stories (1964); Autumn Again, a novelette (1964); Change, a novel (1965); Stars on a Snowy Night, a collection of short stories (1966); Seeing the Palm Trees Again, a novel (1967); The White Pony, a collection of short stories (1969); The Flame, a novel (1969); When the Scholars Met, a collection of short stories (1972); and The Task, a novel (1974). The year 1975 proved to be a turning point in her writing career when, for the first time, she visited the People's Republic of China. Her



post-1975 works focus mainly on the PRC--people from the mainland that have come to the United States and self-exiled Chinese going (or returning) to their homeland, including Women in New China, a collection of short stories (1977); The Minority Thai in Yunnan, a collection of travel stories (1978); The Fu Family, a novel (1979); Among Three Walking, a novel (1982); Search, a collection of short stories (1986); and Joy at Reunion, a collection of short stories (1989).

Most of Lihua Yu's works are about Chinese voluntary exiles. For instance, her most recent novel San Ren Xing (Among Three Walking, 1982), uses themes that we recognize from Seeing the Palm Trees Again. The novel is about three Taiwanese who have been educated in the United States: Professor Lu, Professor Huang, and Dr. Fu. Professor Lu has lived in the United States for over thirty years and, since the People's Republic of China opened its doors to the West, has been invited to the PRC to give lectures. He enjoys teaching in China, especially the respect and privileges associated with his temporary stays in China as an overseas Chinese scholar. Professor Huang had been Lu's college classmate in the U.S. Huang and his wife both came to China after their graduate education and settled permanently there, teaching at a university in Nanjing. As they stay longer in China, they gradually realize the severe limitations there such as the lack of research equipment and funding; and since they are no longer regarded as overseas scholars, they live

the life of common Chinese citizens. Dr. Fu is a postdoctoral student in the United States (Professor Lu's student) who is seriously considering settling permanently in the PRC. His relatives and friends in China all discourage him from doing so. In a conflict that readers of Seeing the Palm Trees Again will find familiar, Professor Lu's niece has expressed an interest in Fu, who also likes her, but Professor Huang warns Fu against getting involved with the girl because her primary objective, like that of Yishan in Seeing the Palm Trees Again, is to go to the United States; thus, a conflict in future goals seems about to arise. This novel also has an open ending: the reader is left to wonder about Fu's final decision and his relationship with Lu's niece.

Fu Jia de Ernumen (The Fu Family, 1979) is another novel about Chinese students in the United States. Like Tianlei in Seeing the Palm Trees Again, the six children in the Fu family (four sons and two daughters) are urged by their parents to seek futures in America. The father, a wealthy businessman in Taiwan who is strongly convinced that the only way he can give his children a bright future is to send them to the United States, pressures his children to go there immediately after they finish their undergraduate degrees at home. The novel, through the experience of each of the first five children (the youngest one is still receiving mandatory military training in Taiwan), reveals the gaps between parents' expectations of their children and the children's

own desires, the consequences of the father's decisions, and the cultural differences between the Americans and the Chinese.

Lihua Yu's works have enjoyed tremendous popularity in Taiwan and Hong Kong and among Chinese readers overseas since the 1960s. Some of her novels have also been published on the mainland of China since 1980 and have won overwhelming acclaim there as well. Seeing the Palm Trees Again is particularly worth translating. Three major reasons can be cited.

The first reason is the author's meticulous and objective creation of the characters. She has successfully portrayed the life of many Chinese students overseas through her careful observation and description of their activities and thinking. In creating the character of Tianlei, she has said what many people in Tianlei's situation feel but are reluctant to express openly: the feeling of rootlessness, the desire to be understood, and the endless search for one's true identity. Her description of the attitudes and conceptions of people in Taiwan towards the United States is also useful for an American reader to know.

Lihua Yu's simple and straightforward Chinese style in Seeing the Palm Trees Again is another reason for the novel's popularity. Her language is not burdened with ornate diction as is common in books of its kind. Her style allows the reader to get closely involved in the story itself and to

visualize the characters and scenes. Her most noticeable strength is in writing dialog. Depending on the characters portrayed, the diction and syntax of her dialog vary appropriately, creating the sense that the characters are people whom we see in real life instead of being fictitious. Another element that contributes to the brightness of her style is the innovative and successful incorporation of syntax from Indo-European languages into Chinese. As Nobel-winning physicist Chen-ning Yang points out in his preface which accompanies most editions of Lihua Yu's works, "She has introduced many syntactic structures from Western languages and created a language style that is pleasant, readable, and well knit." For instance, the syntactic structure based on a main clause that is modified by initial, medial, and final free modifiers--a rarity in the Chinese language--is found in many places in her writing; an example is the first paragraph in Chapter One:

Kaozhe langan, yi pai ren dou zai xiang ta zhao shou.  
 lean railing one line people all are toward he wave hand  
Jichang de yangguang fangsi di sa zai ta lian  
 airport 's sunlight unrestrainedly pour on he face  
shang, shi ta wu fa ren qing shei shi shei. . .  
 top make him no way recognize clearly who is who. . .  
 Erduo yinwei feiji jiangluo hou de kongqi yali,  
 ear because plane land after 's air pressure  
hai zai juliedi tongzhe, ling ta ting bu chulai shei

still is violently painful cause he hear not able who  
shi shei. Dai dian jucu, ta zou xia futi, zou  
 is who with a little nervousness he walk down ramp walk  
dao yangguang li. Likai shi nian, ta jing wang le  
 to sunlight inside leave ten year he even forget (past)  
Taipei de xiatian ruci yanre! Zhanzai taiyang xia, feng  
 Taipei 's summer so hot stand sun below wind  
yi chui, yi ge ren jihu keyi ranshao qilai.  
 once blow one (classifier) person almost can burn start

Translation:

Behind the railing, a line of people wave to him. Fierce sunlight pours directly onto his face, so bright that he cannot see who they are. . . Because of the change in pressure from landing, his ears still feel intense pain, making him unable to recognize the voices. A little nervous, he walks down the ramp and into the sun. Away from Taipei for ten years, he has even forgotten the deadly heat here in the summer time. With a little wind, one could almost be set ablaze standing in the sun.

In the first sentence of this paragraph, kaozhe (lean) langan (railing), yi (one) pai (line) ren (person) dou (all) zai (are) xiang (toward) ta (he) zhao (wave) shou (hand), the main clause yi pai ren dou zai xiang ta zhao shou (a line of people wave to him) is preceded by an initial free modifier: kaozhe langan (lean against the railing). If this sentence

were written in a more common Chinese syntax, it would likely be Yi pai ren kaozhe langan. Tamen xiang ta zhao shou (A line of people lean against the railing. They wave to him). The author's adoption of Western syntax makes the sentence sound fresh and innovative, and from such a structure, a careful, educated reader may gather that the author is familiar with at least one Western language. The syntax is also appropriate for the story, since it is about someone who has been away from his homeland for an extended period of time. Thus, from the very beginning of the novel, the reader senses from the slightly out-of-the-ordinary syntax that some cultural differences are likely to follow. The second sentence, jichang (airport) de ('s) yangguang (sunlight) fangsidi (unrestrainedly) sa (pour) zai (on) ta (he) lian (face) shang (top), shi (make; cause) ta (he) wu (no) fa (way) ren (recognize) qing (clearly) shei (who) shi (is) shei (who), is an ingenious combining of what normally would have been two sentences in Chinese. The first part jichang de yangguang fangsidi sa zai ta lian shang (fierce sunlight pours directly onto his face) is the main clause, and the rest an addition to the base clause in the form of what is called in English a participial phrase. Normally, a Chinese reader would expect two sentences: Jichang de yangguang fangsidi sa zai ta lian shang. Ta wu fa ren qing shei shi shei (Fierce sunlight pours directly onto his face. He is unable to recognize who they are). The word shi (causing) makes the second part of the

sentence an effect of the first one (the base clause). Normally shi is preceded by a noun or noun phrase in Chinese, for instance, yangguang shi ta wu fa ren qing shei shi shei (the sunlight makes him unable to recognize who they are); but the author innovatively places a sentence in front of shi, thereby combining two closely related sentences into one, and this structure has been retained in translation. The following is how the paragraph might have appeared had it been written in ordinary Chinese (the translation preserves all the normal syntactic structures):

A line of people lean against the railing. They wave to him. Fierce sunlight pours directly onto his face. He is unable to recognize who they are. . . . Because of pressure on landing, his ears feel intense pain. He is unable to recognize the voices. He rather nervously walks down the ramp and into the sunlight. He has been away for ten years and has forgotten the intense heat in Taipei. When a person stands in the sun, he can almost be set ablaze with a little wind.

Certainly the intended meaning can still be conveyed through this version, but it would not have the fresh, vigorous touch which Lihua Yu gives it. George Steiner, commenting on Nabokov's writing, says, "Nabokov is a writer who works very near the intricate threshold of syntax; he experiences linguistic forms in a state of manifold potentiality and, moving across vernaculars, is able to keep words and phrases

in a charged, unstable mode of vitality" (Steiner 1971). The same can be said of Lihua Yu, who grew up in China and was educated both at home and in this country. Her Chinese style has been enriched by structures from English.

A third reason for the novel's importance is its existing as well as potential further influence. Most of Lihua Yu's novels and short stories are about the lives of people who, like the author herself, have come abroad to become voluntary exiles. The author has been called a spokesperson for the "rootless generation," a phrase she aptly coined in Seeing the Palm Trees Again. Her works have been termed "The Songs of the Exile." (Pai, 1976). A main reason for the tremendous popularity of her works is that people in Taiwan, as well as on the mainland of China, have a keen interest in the lives of exiled intellectuals such as Tianlei Moe. But frequently, people who have not truly experienced this kind of life themselves are misled by the acquisition of status and wealth of such people into thinking that they, or their children, will be happy and worry-free once they come to the land of promise. In this connection, the novel is a valuable source of didactic information for the Chinese public and, at the same time, it will aid American readers in understanding the lives and backgrounds of the wandering Chinese, who are eternally uncertain. They leave behind a homeland that they still miss, but for political or economic reasons, they choose to stay abroad at the cost of nostalgia and uncertainty. The novel



coalesces with the experience of exiles from many cultures. As one critic points out, "The vivid description of scene and the psychological subtlety of character in the novel will outlive its historical context" (Pai, 1976).

☺☺☺ Seeing the Palm Trees Again is about a professor of Chinese at an American college. As the reader learns from the flashbacks in the novel, the protagonist, Tianlei Moe, majored in English at Taiwan University. Immediately after he finished his undergraduate studies, he, like many of his classmates, had come to the United States to attend graduate school. He left Taiwan to study overseas without a definite plan for his future; he did not know whether he wanted to live in the United States after he finished his graduate studies or to return to Taiwan, or even what field he should go into in graduate school. He went simply because it was the popular thing to do. Partially because of this uncertainty, he at first had high hopes of great achievements--ambitions that would make himself and his family proud. After spending ten years in America, however, all his pioneering spirit has been eroded by reality and he has become a pragmatist. When he visits home, he does not want the glamor and attention given other returning "overseas scholars" (a term used by the Chinese to refer to those Chinese living abroad who have received higher education in a foreign country). All he wants is to spend a quiet vacation with his family and friends and, of course, to meet his girlfriend Yishan Chen, who was introduced to him through

correspondence by his parents.

As soon as he arrives home, as the reader is informed in the beginning of the novel, he discovers that he has become the focus of attention of his family and friends--a sharp contrast to his days in the United States, when he constantly felt isolated and lonely. His relatives and his family's friends all want to meet him, everyone expecting him to tell his success stories. Tianlei, however, does not view himself as an extraordinary success. Because he knows he was not happy when he lived in America, he does not want to color his experiences there, yet at the same time, he does not want to destroy the "colorful balloon" (a narrator's term from the story) that his family cherished during all the years while he was abroad.

Tianlei's overall impression of the United States, it is soon discovered by his family, friends, and relatives, is quite different from that of Zhiyuan Tong, a young man who had also studied in the U.S. and who, after returning to Taiwan, has taken Yishan out several times. Because Yishan has heard many interesting and exciting stories about the United States from Tong, she is confused as to why Tianlei's version of life in America is so different. Therefore, from the first days of his visit home, Tianlei is caught between people who blindly admire America and his own experience in that country.

In this novel, the author, through a variety of characters, presents different attitudes toward living in America. For

instance, Zhiyuan Tong enjoys bragging about the time he spent in the U.S.; he feels proud and superior to other people because he has seen the outside world. To him, his "gilded years" set him above his countrymen and provide him with an asset, something to blow his own trumpet about. There are also characters like the Mo brothers, who are considered to be extraordinary successes because they attended famous universities and subsequently landed good jobs in America. Their main reason for returning to Taiwan is to show off their achievements and to make people envy them. There are also people such as Xinquang Yuan who are quietly content with their achievements but sympathetic to Tianlei's circumstances. Tianlei and Yishan's parents represent the attitude of the general public toward the future of their children--send them to America and they will have a bright future. Although happy to see their son again, Tianlei's parents strongly oppose the idea of Tianlei's staying at home because it would hurt their family's pride and make others think that their son was a failure abroad.

One feature that makes this novel stand out is its realistic perspective. The novel does not perpetuate the conception--or rather misconception--held by many people in Taiwan that life in America is rosy in every respect, that everyone in that country is wealthy and happy; but at the same time, the novel also shows that "America indeed has numerous advantages" (using Tianlei's own words). Tianlei's feeling about America is,

indeed, mixed. On the one hand, he enjoys the personal freedom afforded by the United States (for example, the mobility and the respect for personal privacy) as well as the abundance of material comfort, but on the other hand, being from a foreign country, he constantly feels lonely and isolated. He wants to get away from this invisible pressure and find peace of mind, but unfortunately, he does not find it at home, for everyone, including his parents and sister, treats him as a visitor; their high-flown words about him make him feel like an outsider again. Certainly his family and friends are not totally responsible for this situation because Tianlei, having been away from home for ten years, has lost touch with his countrymen not only physically but also with their values.

Also as a result of his foreign education (in the broadest sense of the word), Tianlei has become a rebel to certain traditional Chinese values such as parental authority and filial obedience. His parents, especially his father, still expect him to be an obedient child and to follow their wishes in every way, but he frequently refuses to comply. His arguments with his parents illustrate the gap between them--the different values about family pride that they hold. They also show Tianlei's detachment from even his own parents, an added reason for his feeling out of place, even in his own home.

Tianlei's feeling of being isolated is also shown through his low self-image. Although his family and friends view him

as a success because he has earned a Ph.D. and secured a teaching position at an American college, he himself is not proud to be a Chinese language teacher. Being among people whose concerns are merely mercenary, he feels he is being looked down upon by other overseas scholars, and thus he starts to mock himself and his own profession. Perhaps also for this reason, he refuses to go along with people's admiration of America because he, being a Chinese teacher and feeling that his work is underappreciated, is not happy there. In a way, Tianlei's return can be viewed as an attempt to escape from his isolation and depression in the United States, but the comfort and peace of mind he intended to seek is ruined by his parents' and girlfriend's overt worship of America.

Tianlei's relationship with Yishan is also hampered by this difference in perceptions. Yishan has many naive ideas about life in the United States. She has always wanted to study in America, but because she has failed her overseas studies examinations several times, she places all her hopes of coming to America on Tianlei. Tianlei clearly realizes this point, but he is unsure as to whether real love also exists between them. When his parents introduced Yishan to him as his pen pal, he welcomed the opportunity to write to her because he was lonely and in need of spiritual support. And perhaps because of his isolation and lack of direct communication with her, he may have idealized her. Thus, when they meet in person, he begins to suspect their incompatibility.

Tianlei's view of Yishan is, to a large measure, shaped by his comparing her with two other women with whom he has had relationships: Meili Zhang and Jiali Lu. The author uses flashbacks to make the comparisons. Often while Tianlei is with or thinks about Yishan, he recalls his past experiences with Jiali or Meili. The flashbacks allow the reader to know more about Tianlei's past, which serves as a point of reference to his present situation.

Meili was Tianlei's classmate at Taiwan University and also his first girlfriend. The feelings that existed between them were pure and spontaneous--not tinged by worldly considerations. As the reader feels, Jiali cared about Tianlei almost like a mother caring about the welfare of her own children. She is the type of woman that Tianlei truly needs as his wife--a woman who is strong, understanding, and compassionate.

In contrast, Yishan is extremely childish and self-centered. Because she is young and naive, she needs a man who is mature, caring, and decisive, and these happen to be the very qualities that Tianlei also needs--in a woman.

When Yishan is introduced to Tianlei by his parents, the objective of both families is to see them fall in love and get married when Tianlei returns to Taiwan. Yishan's father is very Westernized in his thoughts. Yishan's worship of America is, in part, the result of her family's influence, but it is also shaped by the attitude of her society toward the West.

At the time--and to a large extent this remains true today--those college graduates who are able to attend graduate schools in technologically advanced countries such as the United States are regarded as having promising futures. Not only are those students admired by their classmates who are unable to study overseas, but the parents of those students also feel proud of being able to send their children abroad. Tianlei, having experienced the life that everyone at home admires, hints to Yishan that she should not anticipate merely fun and excitement when she goes to America, that besides pressures from study and work, there would also be an invisible pressure--the loneliness felt by foreign students as a result of cultural and racial differences.

As Tianlei continues to warn Yishan not to have unrealistic expectations about life in America, Yishan becomes confused and wonders what has made Tianlei so pessimistic when he describes his years there. Tianlei's response is, "What I considered bad experience is not manual labor; it is something intangible--a feeling. For example, when you are with Americans you do not feel you are one of them" (Chapter Seven). But no matter what other people say about America, Yishan is determined to find out for herself. Thus, when Tianlei asks her how she feels about staying in Taiwan after they get married, her answer is a straightforward no.

As Tianlei and Yishan spend more time together, they both start to recognize the vast differences in their opinions.

Tianlei gradually becomes less eager to be with Yishan and sometimes has to be persuaded by his parents to go out with her. While they are on a tour in Jinmen, one of the Mo brothers who is a mathematics professor at Yale University shows an interest in her. Because she feels slighted by Tianlei, she starts to flirt with Mo to provoke Tianlei intentionally. Each time she plays this trick, Tianlei falls for it. It is clear from the novel that although Yishan is young and inexperienced, she is egocentric and manipulative, always placing her desire to go the United States above other people's concerns.

Tianlei, on the other hand, always seems indecisive. His inability to act is a direct result of uncertainty about his future. The question that has troubled him the most is whether or not to return to the United States in the fall. After he speaks with his former professor Mr. Chiu and learns of the urgent need for English teachers in his alma mater and of Mr. Chiu's desire to run a literary journal with him, he tells Professor Chiu that he has decided to stay in Taiwan and teach for at least a year or two. But later, after a fight with Yishan over Mo, he agrees to take Yishan to the U.S. that fall. But after Mr. Chiu dies in an accident, he changes his mind again and tells the English department chairman that he has decided to stay after all. Even at the end of the novel, the reader still does not know for certain which path he will take; all we know is that he goes to Yishan's house. What will he



say to her this time? Will he apologize to her and change his mind again or will he tell her that he will stay at any cost? The open ending of the novel is another way, and an effective one, through which the author portrays Tianlei's indecisive character. On the other hand, it passes the indecision onto the reader unless the reader is sure by now that Tianlei will stay in Taiwan.

Besides the question of whether to return to the United States, we can also see Tianlei's inability to decide from many other incidents. For example, during his affair with Jiali, he even asks her whether she would marry him. When Jiali says if he was sure she could ask her husband for a divorce, Tianlei becomes silent. He is afraid to hurt his parents' feelings by marrying a divorced woman, and he is also afraid to destroy Yishan's hopes. Thus, he does not have the courage to offer Jiali his commitment.

What makes this novel exceptional is precisely its true-to-life quality. The author realistically portrays the life of a self-exiled Chinese intellectual in the United States--the dreams he had when he first came to this country and his maturation. The protagonist's "growing up" is not a simple realization that a Chinese person, because of language barriers and racial and cultural differences, should not live in the United States and that his only way to find happiness is to return to his native country, nor is it a naive conviction that being among one's own people and speaking one's native tongue

necessarily entail one's personal satisfaction. Rather, growing up means being able to face reality and to realize the advantages as well as the disadvantages of each choice. In a way, Tianlei's "rootlessness" offers him an advantage--the opportunity to truly experience these vastly different cultures and to compare them. His indecisiveness is, in itself, a decision--a decision to search for his true identity and to discover, for himself, why he feels like a visitor both in America and in his native land.

Seeing the Palm Trees Again is a truthful description of the perceptions of common Chinese people about America. As such, the novel can serve as a bridge of understanding between American and Chinese readers. Often, Americans wonder why Chinese students in the United States think and behave differently. This novel, through the life of a "rootless" Chinese person, reveals the inner thoughts and the background of this group of people. The novel is also a valuable source of information for Chinese readers who plan to study in America as well as for those who are interested in knowing what it is like to come to and study and live in a Western country. Art, in this case, is partly information. Although students from the mainland are from a somewhat different background from that of Taiwanese students, they share many similar experiences. Currently, there are an estimated forty thousand students from the mainland of China in the United States and the number is growing. It is hoped that this translation will add to the

reader's understanding of those students' lives--their situations, background, and thinking.

Given the stature of the novelist and the value of the novel as a bridge of understanding, I felt I had set myself a worthwhile task. The problems that I encountered in making the translation were themselves examples of gaps between two languages and cultures, and it may be of interest to look at some of them.

In translating Seeing the Palm Trees Again, I have often found it necessary to make choices between retaining expressions that are peculiar to the Chinese language and replacing them with equivalent ones, i.e., expressions that native speakers of English would use in a similar situation. The question "How would a native English speaker say it?" was constantly on my mind, and this was true for both dialogue and narrative in the novel. During the translating process, I once again realized that there are many expressions and syntactic structures in Chinese which native speakers of English normally would not use.

Kinship terms in Chinese present intricate problems for the translator. There are many sets of terms which specifically denote kinship relationships in Chinese, but their strict correspondents are absent in English. For instance, in Chinese one does not talk about his "brother"; such a general word literally does not exist. Instead, a Chinese speaker will refer either to his older brother (gege) or his younger brother

(didi). Similarly, uncles that are on the mother's side are referred to as jiujiu, and those on the father's side are either called bobo (for those older than the father) or shushu (for those younger than the father). It is not clear why the age distinction is not made for uncles on the mother's side; nevertheless, the existence of such separate terms implies that family relationships and respect for older members in the family are regarded as very important by the Chinese.

In Seeing the Palm Trees Again, Tianmei addresses her brother as xiao ge, which literally means "little older brother." For instance, in Chapter Three, Tianmei asks her brother: "Xiao (little) ge (older brother), ni (you) jīn (this) wan (evening) zenmole (what happened)?" This is the customary way in China for a sibling to address his/her youngest older brother. However, I do not think that this original form of address can, or should, be preserved in translation. I changed xiaoge to the addressee's first name, mainly because this form of address is never used by native speakers of English; thus, it might actually confuse the reader because of its strangeness. When a native English speaker addresses his brother, no matter whether an older or a younger one, normally he would simply use his first name or "brother." I decided to adopt the convention of using first names in my translation so that the dialogues would sound natural. I did, however, use the literal translation of xiaoge once in Chapter Three, where, because of the joking context, "little older brother" did not

seem intrusive ("What else have you learned besides showing courtesy to women and smoking, Little Older Brother?"), and in doing so, a desirable degree of foreignness is retained.

The following passage provides several examples in which conscious choices had to be made. For illustrative purposes, I have provided the original in transliteration and an interlinear gloss followed by my translation of the passage.

Original:

Xiao ge, ni jinwan zenmo le? Tong bobo  
 little older brother you tonight what (past) Tong uncle  
hao yi qing ni lai wan, ni zong  
 good intention invite you come play you somehow  
yao fuyan renjia yixia, zheyang shengqing  
 have deal them a little bit such expression  
 to with per-  
 functorily

huanghu-de.

absent-minded

Translation:

Tianlei, what's gotten into you tonight? Uncle Tong is so nice as to invite you to come here. You must not let them down. You look so absent-minded.

Besides changing "little older brother" to the addressee's first name (Tianlei), I also selected an idiomatic expression in English, "What's gotten into you tonight?" as the English equivalent for ni jinwan zenmo le? (what happened to you tonight?). This informal way of inquiry seems appropriate for

a conversation carried on during a dance. Another reason is that if we used slightly more formal expressions such as "What's the matter with you?" or "What happened to you?" exclusively, the more casual ones, which are also frequently used in daily conversation, would never have a chance to be used in translation.

Tianmei's next remark also requires a number of substitute structures. The first one, again, has to do with a form of address. Bobo is a polite title in Chinese which, in addition to its direct use as a kinship term, is used to refer to a man who is older than the speaker's father, but the problem is that this term is absent in English. The word that comes closest to the Chinese bobo in English is "uncle," which, unfortunately, may mislead the reader into thinking that Uncle Tong is a relative of Tianmei's (which is clearly not the case in the original text). If we used "Mr.," it would be considered impolite in Chinese due to the distancing implied by the word. Obviously, neither choice is perfect. I rendered bobo as "uncle" despite the potential confusion because one of the dictionary definitions of the word "uncle," though not a central one, is "a form of respectful address to an older man, used especially by children." This substitution, though not a perfect match, is as close as can be achieved unless a footnote is used. I rejected the use of a footnote in this case because it would involve an explanation of word order, which could add to the possible confusion, for in Chinese the

name comes before the title instead of after it as is the case in English.

The second difficulty is translation of words whose meanings are rather broad or vague. The word wan is such an example. In Chinese, the meaning of this word is quite broad. It can mean "to play," "to have fun," "to have a good time," or simply "to spend time together (with friends)." For instance, a Chinese speaker may say "Qing (please) lai (come) wo (my) jia (home; house) wan (play)" to mean "Please come to my home for a visit." Since "play" is a word that carries a childish implication, and the other alternatives are also not extremely appropriate for the context, I chose to leave the word wan out and let the sentence "Uncle Tong is so nice as to invite you to come here" suggest "coming here to have a good time."

The third problem is in translating words that are quite commonly used in Chinese but are rarely used in everyday English. The word fuyan in ni zong yao fuyan renjia yixia (literally: "you somehow have to deal with them perfunctorily a little") is such an example. The implication of the sentence is that no matter whether you really enjoy being here or not, you have to at least pretend that you are having a good time. The literal meaning of fuyan is "to deal with perfunctorily," but the phrase is not very commonly used in English and thus would seem inappropriate or out of place for the context. My solution to this problem is to replace the original sentence with "You must not let them down," which, although it sounds

a little more commanding or forceful than the original, basically conveys the same implied meaning, and it is also a sentence which a native speaker of English might use in such a situation. In this instance, context plays an important role. Given the preceding and the following sentences, it is sometimes helpful for the translator to consider alternative expressions that mean about the same (such as "you must not let them down" or "you must go through the motions" in the above case) to fill in the gap.

Two examples that deal with rendering idiomatic expressions in Chinese into English are presented below. In Chapter Nine, Tianlei jokingly says to his sister:

Original:

Nimen                nu        ren,    shetou    jiu    shi                you

(plural)   female people   tongue   indeed   be

tai   chang   le   dian.

too   long   a little bit

Translation:

Women's tongues are a little bit too long.

A strict, word-for-word translation of this sentence would be "You women's tongues are a little bit too long." This version, though not an idiomatic expression in English, is perfectly comprehensible. If we translate the sentence into "You women are gossipy," the intended meaning is preserved, but the figurative aspect (i.e., implication) is lost. It is true that the English expression "have a big mouth" may be



regarded as its equivalent because it, like the original, is an indirect way of reproaching someone for giving out too much information and both "tongue" and "mouth" are associated with speech, but I chose to retain the Chinese idiomatic expression for its comprehensibility and freshness. Its foreign sounding may serve as a reminder to the reader of the cultural background of the novel.

Not all idiomatic expressions, however, can be preserved in translation. Sometimes only the sense conveyed can be translated while the idiomatic nature of the expression is lost. For instance, in Chapter Nine, there is a sentence containing a Chinese idiomatic expression of this kind:

Yishan shi ge hao nu hai, yexu ta de

Yishan is (classifier) good female child perhaps she 's

huanjing tai hao le, bu mian youdian

surrounding too good (past) not avoidable somewhat

youzhi ji bu zhi tian gao di hou.

immature and not know sky high earth thick

Translation:

Yishan is a good girl, but perhaps because of the way she was brought up, she acts somewhat immature.

A literal translation, with some latitude, of the above sentence would be "Yishan is a good girl, but perhaps because of the way she was brought up, she acts somewhat immature, not knowing how high the sky is and how thick the earth is." What is meant by the idiomatic expression bu zhi tian gao di hou

(not knowing how high the sky is. . .) is that Yishan is presumptuous, the sense of which is already conveyed by the word youzhi (immature). Thus, I eliminated bu zhi tian gao di hou on grounds of redundancy. As an American professor who is familiar with the Chinese language has pointed out to me--thus confirming my earlier suspicion--the Chinese language tolerates more repetitions, what would be considered by Westerners as redundancies. This is a problem that should be borne in mind as one translates Chinese into a Western language. To produce a translation that is readable and terse, certain elements that are regarded as normal in one language may need to be pruned away or polished out in another language in order to fit into the accepted style of the target language.

Names of food items present a unique problem for the translator. In certain cases, neither lexical nor semantic equivalents can be found. For example, in Chapter Nine, several food items that are peculiarly Chinese are mentioned, among them tangyuan and zongzi. Tangyuan is a type of dumpling, but it is somewhat different in that it is made of glutinous rice instead of wheat flour. Here, I have three options. One is translate the word as "dumpling"; however, this would be inexact because it may be confused with jiaozi, which is also a stuffed dumpling but always made of wheat flour. A second option is to qualify "dumpling" by calling the food item "glutinous rice dumpling." This may be passable, but it is a circumlocution. It is analogous to translating the

sentence "He had a bloody mary" into "He had a cocktail made of vodka, tomato juice, and seasonings." The sense of immediacy is lost. Another reason for not choosing this elaborate expression is that the word tangyuan appears several times in the chapter, and to use a descriptive phrase each time would be repetitive. A third choice is to retain the Chinese word, i.e., to transliterate it and add a footnote to explain how the food item is made and served. I regarded this option to be appropriate for the context because it would keep a little bit of a foreign flavor in the translation (reminding the reader of the locale of the story) while being as informative as possible. The same is true of zongzi, which is a pyramid-shaped dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves and frequently served during the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. It is almost inconceivable to have a character say, "I'd love to have some pyramid-shaped dumplings made of. . . ." In a few cases, I found the use of footnotes necessary and helpful, although, as a general rule, I refrained from adding an excessive number of footnotes, which would be distracting and make it hard for the reader to remember all the foreign words and their meanings.

Occasionally, omissions are necessary. For instance, certain descriptive words are best left out of the translation since they are meaningful only in the original text because of cultural reasons. The following sentence (from Chapter Three) represents such a case.

original:

Ta dai ta hui zuo, gang zuo ding,  
 he take her return table as soon as sit still  
yuedui xiang bei qian jun wan  
 band like (caused by) thousand troop ten thousand  
ma zhuizhu side, ji gu xiang luo di  
 horse pursue manner quick drum loud gong  
giao da qilai.  
 knock beat start

Translation:

The moment they return to their table, the band starts to play again, the sound of drums and gongs deafening their ears.

A fairly literal translation (with a little latitude) of this sentence may be "As soon as he takes her back to the table and both of them sit still, the band, like thousands of pursuing armies, starts to beat drums and gongs." The phrase which I eliminated in my translation was the one about one thousand troops and ten thousand horses, because it would seem intrusive and inappropriate for the context in English, even though the description sounds natural in Chinese. The reason for this is that a cultural element is involved. In ancient China, troops that pursued their enemies were accompanied by army bands in which drums, gongs, and trumpets were the chief instruments. In Chinese, one can use this phrase to describe the loudness of drums and similar instruments figuratively (as if the sound were made by thousands of troops and horses).

Because a literal translation of this phrase would introduce an element that sounds exotic or tastelessly descriptive, I took the liberty of eliminating the phrase and, in its place, added the effects of the loudness of drums and gongs (the sound of drums and gongs deafening their ears). I think that this substitution, although it sacrifices the historical association, is appropriate in order to produce a natural-sounding yet still descriptive sentence in English.

As we have seen above, it is quite often the case that both Chinese and English speakers may operate on very similar semantic structures, yet they use expressions that are peculiar to their own languages. For this kind of situation, I believe it is a good idea to find substitute structures in English, that is, structures which native speakers might use in the same or a similar situation. Even though such substitutions may involve the risk of losing certain culture-specific information, they certainly will have the advantage of making the translation more readable. The audience of a translation is an important consideration. If this novel were intended to enable an academic audience to study Chinese culture, then a more literal rendition with more footnotes and perhaps appendices would be appropriate. Since the present translation is targeted toward a general English-speaking readership, readability becomes a crucial consideration.

The use of verb tenses is another major decision made in the translating process. I used the narrative present tense

to set up the general framework of the novel mainly because the story contains numerous flashbacks, and the narrative present provides an effective means for distinguishing these flashbacks from the rest of the story. In Chinese, verb tenses are often not explicitly marked, and the reader has to rely on verbal references to time (such as "yesterday" or "next week") or the context to know the time. The following passage, from Chapter Three, is an example:

Tamen xiongmei liang ren xiangcha si sui, du shu de  
 they sibling two person differ four year study book 's  
shihou, ta shang daxue, ta hai zai chu  
 time he attend university she still is in high school  
san.

three

Translation:

There is a four-year age difference between them. When he was in college she was a junior in high school.

In the original, the only clue to time that a Chinese reader has is ta shang duxue (he in college) and ta hai zai chu san (she still in the third grade in high school). In the Chinese sentence, the verbs are not inflected; they are still in the present tense. Such peculiar structures, however, cannot be preserved in English, for one cannot get away from using the past tense when talking about the time while Tianlei was in college. Another example that shows the need to adjust verb tenses is that in Chinese, one can say wo (I) zuotian

(yesterday) gu (go) ta (he) jia (house) de ('s) shihou (time), ta (he) bu (not) zai (is in). When this sentence is translated into English, the past tense has to be used: When I went to his house yesterday, he was not in. In the Chinese sentence, what implies the past aspect is the adverb "yesterday," not the verbs themselves. From these examples, it is clear that changes in verb tenses are necessary for Chinese-English translation.

In the process of translating this novel, a major practical problem was how to promote, protect, and verify quality in translation into a language not native to me; in other words, how could I, as a non-native speaker of English, ensure that the translation would sound smooth and idiomatic in English while at the same time remaining as faithful as possible to the original text? To achieve this goal, at the suggestion of my advisor, I worked with a number of native speakers of English, and the assistance that I received and the experience gained proved to be invaluable.

After translating each chapter, I met with one or two native speakers and read my translation to them. When they heard a sentence or expression that sounded unusual in English, they would stop me and either suggest one or more alternatives or have me provide a word-for-word translation of the original and then we would try to search for a match or equivalent in English. In the process, I discovered that there are numerous expressions in Chinese that could easily be translated into

English, but they would not be native-sounding; that is, they would sound somewhat strange in English. For instance, in Chapter Six, after Tianlei's parents' home has been broken into, Tianlei says to the police officer (literal translation): "While I was abroad I heard that a lot of progress was being made in Taiwan, that people's lives had been greatly improved and the social order was much better." This version, although it is grammatical and its meaning basically clear, does not sound quite as natural in English as the following version recommended to me: "While I was abroad I heard that a lot of progress had gone on, that people's lives had really improved and that the crime rate had gone down." The expression "the crime rate had gone down" is a particularly noticeable improvement over my previous version "the social order was much better" because of its idiomatic nature. Although in a strict sense the second version may be regarded as an interpretation of the original, it is what a native English speaker would say in a similar context; thus, it can properly be viewed as an equivalent, rather than a stilted, word-for-word match, of the Chinese text.

Another example in which the use of an idiomatic expression made a sentence of a conversation sound more natural is when Tianmei asked her brother why he had not been able to find a wife in all the years he had spent in the United States. Tianlei's response, in my earlier version, was "Well, I could explain if I wanted to, but this is not the right time or



place. I'll let you know the details later." The last sentence is clear but not as idiomatic as "I'll fill you in on the details later," which was suggested to me by a native English speaker. This change, although a minor one, has made the translation more authentic in English, as if the sentence were originally produced in the target language.

Occasionally, however, a native-speaking helper may suggest a change in hopes of clarifying the meaning of a sentence, but in effect it would depart too far from the original. For instance, in Chapter Eighteen, after Professor Chiu dies in a motorcycle accident, there is a sentence describing Tianmei as she sits next to her brother: "Tianmei's eyes are also moist as she sits quietly next to him, pondering on the tremendous sorrow her brother must be feeling and on how unjustly a good person like Mr. Chiu, whom she has only heard of, has been treated by life." My native-speaker helper detected the intrusiveness of the phrase "whom she has only heard of" and suggested its deletion and adding the sentence, "She feels strongly about this injustice even though she is not personally acquainted with Mr. Chiu." In this instance, I took my helper's advice with a grain of salt. Certainly this addition has the merit of eliminating the intrusive phrase and still stating the fact that Tianmei is not personally acquainted with Professor Chiu, but it may be seen as putting words into the author's mouth. Furthermore, "she feels strongly about this injustice" is repetitious of the previous sentence. Thus, to

solve the intrusiveness problem, I decided to take out the intruding phrase and let the rest of the sentence stand as it was, since the fact that Mr. Chiu was Tianlei's former professor and not a personal acquaintance of Tianmei's was already clear from the context and this way the sentence flows more smoothly.

I found my experience working with native speakers on this project very beneficial because in addition to helping me polish my translation, they have made me recognize many syntactic and semantic differences between English and Chinese. Because of their native fluency in English and their lack of access to the original text, my native-speaker helpers were not constrained by linguistic structures that are peculiar to the Chinese language and thus were able to effectively detect "strangeness" in my translated text. It has been proven in the past, notably in Bible translations, and again in the present project that native speakers of the target language are a great asset in promoting quality in translation.

## CHAPTER ONE

Behind the railing, a line of people wave to him. Fierce sunlight pours directly onto his face, so bright that he cannot see who they are. Shouts of "Tianlei!" rush to him through the scorching sun. Because of the change in pressure from landing, his ears still feel intense pain, making him unable to recognize the voices. A little nervous, he walks down the ramp and into the sun. Away from Taipei for ten years, he has even forgotten the deadly heat here in the summer time. With a little wind, one could almost be set ablaze standing in the sun.

As he approaches the crowd he sees her first. She stands next to her mother and is a short, stocky woman, her face round with an elfish chin. Her eyes seem to smile when she is not talking, and they seem to speak when she smiles. Her thin lips are stretched between the slightly upturned corners of her mouth. She is wearing a straight Western dress, yet her narrow green belt sets off a figure that is a little too full for it. He does not consider her pretty: her neck is not long enough, her skin not delicate enough, and her body too short. Having looked at American girls for ten years he would not call her gorgeous. Even so his eyes still fall on her first, maybe because of her youthfulness, or her eyes, or her green dress, or maybe it's because she is half the reason he came back, or perhaps it's where she is standing--he can't

be sure. At any rate, he notices her first, then his parents. His mother's hair is already gray and her back slightly hunched, his father's lips shrivelled and his cheekbones prominent.

"Hello, Mom, Dad."

During the past ten years Tianlei has shed tears, but never so abruptly and spontaneously. He leans against the rail, his hands clutching his mother's thin shoulders tightly, his head against her twitching neck, letting the tears flow freely.

Father grabs his shoulder with one hand. He lifts his head and sees Father's Adam's apple bobbing with difficulty. Mother is already shaking with crying, whispering, "Tianlei, Tianlei, oh, Tianlei!"

"You can go to Customs and we'll meet around the other side," says his father. "Oh, why don't you say hello to these folks first? They all came to meet you."

He dries his eyes against his mother's shoulder and, raising his face, greets everyone. Then he turns and walks into the baggage room. Through a door on the other side of the room Mother enters, followed by Father. Seizing her son tightly once again, she strokes his arms and shoulders and neck, not a word coming from her mouth, while tears roll down her face again. Even though he has lived in the U.S. for ten years he hasn't learned the Western custom of embracing; he stands awkwardly, murmuring: "See, Mom--haven't I come back all right? You shouldn't be crying; you should feel happy

now. Right, Dad?" He turns to his father, his tone begging for help.

"Why, of course. Defong, it's such a good thing he came back. You shouldn't go on feeling sad."

Because his father had spoken with the inspecting officer earlier, the officer takes only a brief look at the contents of his suitcases and lets him pass through. The father and the son carry the suitcases and bags, Tianlei also helping his mother with one hand, and as soon as they come out from the inspection room, a crowd swarms up to them. Tianlei first greets his grandmother, who is almost ninety years old and has to support herself with a walking stick; then he shakes hands one by one with his uncles, aunts, four cousins and their wives, and then is introduced to Yishan's parents, everybody congratulating him on coming back with glory. Finally he makes his way to Yishan.

"Yishan, thank you for coming."

She lowers her head and greets him in a soft voice. The dizzy feeling he had on landing has now returned, and he feels as if her smile were growing wider and wider, so wide it even expands to other people's faces. Realizing that everyone is smiling at him, he manages to compose himself. His father graciously invites all the friends and relatives home, but this invitation is tactfully declined by all with the assurance that a visit will be paid at a later date. Thus everyone gets into taxis and leaves. Yishan's father comes

up to Tianlei and his father, shakes hands with them and says, "You have a family reunion today so we'd better not disturb you. I'll call you tomorrow, Mr. Moe."

Tianlei's father still insists on their coming along, saying, "Oh, please come to our place with us, and later we're going to give Tianlei a reception at Yu Garden. We'd love to have you there."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be too convenient for you. You haven't seen each other in all these years--you must have a lot to talk about. Let's see, why don't you all go home first and let Tianlei have some rest? We'll come over in the evening and then we can go to the National Guest House together at seven. It'll be our treat."

Tianlei's mother wants to add something but Yishan's father gets in before her. "That's all settled then." No sooner has he finished his remark than the three of them are gone.

The alley along Xinyi Road is as narrow as before. The Shandong Noodle Restaurant at the entrance of the alley is still open, but the ownership has changed. Because the alley gets even narrower as they proceed, they have to get out of the taxi and walk in. The ditch along the alley is filled with trash--fruit skins, paper, rotten bananas and sugarcane pulp. Nothing has changed here in all these years. When they reach the end of the alley where Tianlei's home is, he turns and sees a dazzling red door. The maid who comes to open the door is wearing wooden clogs. He is surprised to find that

the maid is no longer the Miss Xia he knew before. He feels as though he has come to the wrong door.

"Ah-cui, this is Young Master," his mother says.

Ah-cui greets him right away, addressing him as "Young Master." He hasn't been called that in over ten years so it sounds enormously strange to him. "Young Master"? If she knew that he once held a job picking apples in an orchard, and not only picking them, in fact living on them for two meals a day, that he had also been a dishwasher, a bus boy, and at one time even cleaned ladies' rooms in a dormitory, would she still have called him "Young Master"? The maid places a pair of brand new slippers for him at the door and takes his luggage into the living room. The living room still has a wooden floor, but the light grey couch is not in his memory. He doesn't see any paintings or calligraphy by famous artists hanging on the wall; instead, it is covered with pictures of him, arranged in chronological order. The first one had been taken aboard the boat on his way to the United States. He was singing a Chinese song called "Old Home" just before the boat landed in Honolulu. Only a few days from home, he already missed his family. He remembers the sad voice with which he sang, "Mom, home, when can I come back to you? Will things still be the same?" That picture was taken by a Mr. Gao, a friend of his, as he sang the last line of the song. He can see there was something shining in his eyes; perhaps it was a reflection from the sea, or the moonlight,

or maybe the neon lights. He does not dare to linger over his thoughts: could it be his tears? The second one was taken with three friends from the boat after landing in San Francisco. In the background is the Golden Gate against the sunset, a wild goose flying all alone in front of the huge bridge. He had two goals then: finishing his studies and starting a career. He managed to put a smile on his face in order to boost his courage. The third picture shows him in his friend Zhang's Buick, his one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the window, his eyes staring. His face did not have the brave smile which it had when he first went ashore, nor did it have the luster of hope that it had shown earlier. He recalls that it was his "Painful Summer"--Meili had just married somebody else; he had barely finished his first year of school yet already had to wear glasses; his department chairman told him his English was extremely inadequate, that he should take fewer courses and, as a result, it would take him at least an additional year to finish; summer was coming and he had no prospect of a job. He had sent home the picture of himself sitting in the car just to make his family happy, even though the car wasn't his. Zhang, the owner of the car, had been a classmate of his in high school. He studied science and consequently didn't have to hunt for a job after coming to the U.S.--he could work in the lab. Tianlei, on the other hand, majored in British literature initially and later switched to journalism. During



the school year he worked in the Public Relations Office, earning barely enough to pay for room and board. However, when summer came he had to run around like a homeless dog, trying to look for shelter. He remembers that he eventually did find a job, hauling ice between San Francisco and Carmel. The semi he drove seemed so long that it was almost like a train, and he was on the road from midnight till five a.m. While the rest of the world was asleep, he had to try desperately to keep awake, his eyes red from watching the jagged mountain roads and from straining to avoid being distracted by the fog-clad blue ocean down below. Behind him were tons of ice; before him, cold steep mountains. His heart burned with frustration, anger, and despair as the truck crawled up the mountain, going along the most desolate paths of human existence.

The largest picture was one in which he wears a Ph.D. gown. He alone could tell how many tears and painful realizations were embodied in that one scroll of paper. The smile on his face was put on for his family, friends, and others who were going to study overseas. Some people might think all the hardships and loneliness finally paid off. But was it indeed worth forsaking everything to go all the way across the ocean to the "Golden Country"? He thinks not, yet he would not tell anybody that. Even if he did, people still might not believe it. What's said in the mind is only for oneself; others will listen only to what's said by the mouth. The two smaller

photos next to the graduation one were taken after he landed a job. He did not, as he had hoped to, work for a newspaper as a reporter; instead, he worked for an auto insurance company, making out insurance forms. Each day he would fill in dozens of clients' names, ages, information about their wives and children, their professions, where they lived and for how long. . . . All his colleagues were either high school graduates or college dropouts. He was the only one who had a Ph.D., and because he had a Ph.D, his starting salary was seven thousand a year. Since he was living in Chicago by himself, that of course was quite sufficient. A newspaper publisher in Taipei where he had worked before offered him a position, but he turned it down. If it wasn't because of the difference between American dollars and Taiwan currency, what other reasons could there have been? He did not want to know, because he didn't want to face the possible discovery that his reluctance to go home was due to the traditional idea of "returning home in silken robes and glory." In this picture he stands before the insurance company building, a magnificent spiral-shaped construction in front of mighty Lake Michigan. After working one year for the insurance company he grew tired of the job and it happened that a small college was looking for a Chinese instructor, so he went there. For a journalism Ph.D. to teach college students how to pronounce and write the most basic Chinese characters was as tedious as teaching babies how to talk. The last picture shows him sitting on the

lawn with nine American students. He wears a dark brown suit and holds a curved dark brown English pipe in his hand, looking quite accomplished--only in looks, of course. The two hopes he had when he left Taiwan had both been achieved: he had finished his studies and had also begun a career. But how successful was he now? What criteria should be used to measure these "achievements"?

"Those pictures are what's kept your mother going all these years. She looks them over several times a day," says his father, who is standing at his back.

"Your father's been saying I've devoted all my attention to you and not a bit to him."

He turns, facing the only people in the world whose attitude toward him is not based on calculation, the only people who would not change their love for him according to his level of success, unable to speak a word. He has been away from home for so long that even the most familial sentiments seem strange to him. He wishes that he could hold his parents close and cry to his heart's content, but he dares not do so; he knows that older people have only one dream left: their children's happiness. And he must not ruin their dream with his tears. Thus he says:

"Since Mom misses me so much, I won't go back."

"No! How can you say that!" his father jumps in. "You already have a career and status there, how can you give them up so easily? Even though we miss you and want you to stay,

we can't let your future be ruined for our sake."

"Future? What he needs is love, love from his family and from a girl whom he truly cares about, and he is willing to give up at any time this "future" of which only he himself knows the limits. But how can he let them know all this? He forces a smile and says, "Dad, I was just kidding."

"Look at you, your son has just come back and you've already started to talk like a father."

"Of course, I have to talk that way in front of him; otherwise, how can I be called a father?" he says in a joking manner. Turning at the sound of a footstep he asks, "Oh, Ah-cui, is there something you want?"

"Young Master's bath is ready."

"Good," his mother says. "Why don't you take his things to his room?" Then turning to Tianlei she says, "Go take a good bath, Tianlei. Your shirt is soaked. You were not so sensitive to heat before."

"I don't think it was so hot before."

"Oh, what difference does it make?" says his father. "Maybe you've stayed too long in a country that has air-conditioning all over and simply aren't used to this kind of weather. There is air-conditioning in every home in the States, right?"

"Where did you hear that?" he questions back.

"That was just a guess."

"No, only a small percentage do. Actually the United

states is not quite as heavenly as many people think. When I saw American movies before, I also thought all homes there were as nice as those in Beverly Hills and all the scenery as pretty as Sunset Boulevard; everything was electrical and everybody had money. Well, that's not the case in real life! You should've seen the filth and poverty between thirtieth and fiftieth streets in Chicago; it's ten times worse than this alley."

"Go take your bath, Tianlei," his mother says. "You can tell us all about the United States later. Take the bath first; then you should lie down for a while. Yishan's family is going to be here before long." At mention of Yishan's name, the couple unconsciously look at each other. The mother, watching Tianlei from behind, adds: "Does she look the same as in the picture?"

Tianlei looks back at his parents, replies "Yeah" and goes to his room to change. Just before he walks in the door he is stunned by the sight of the room--everything looks exactly the same as before: his narrow bed, with the adjustable lamp clipped to the headboard, is next to the window; a summer sleeping mat is on the bed, the faded ink spot near the pillow still visible. Once when he and Meili were in the room chatting, he said he was going to write "Meili--Tianlei Moe's future wife" on the first page of a book of hers. She wouldn't let him do that so she tried to grab his pen and while they fought all the ink was squeezed out from the pen

and onto the mat. From then on every night when he slept on that bed he would push the pillow aside and set his face on the blue stain thinking about Meili, the sparkling mock rage in her eyes and the lovely corners of her mouth. Now that he sees the mat again, those old memories rush back. He rests his head on the door to hide his face, and through the transparent window paper he sees a small desk. Under the glass top are a class schedule from the second semester of his fourth year in college and three thin strips of paper with the words: "Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you," "Impart only that knowledge of which you are positive," and "Study overseas and a bright future is yours." He hurriedly steps into the room to get a closer look at the top of the desk. The picture in which Meili wears a straw hat and jogging clothes is no longer there, but his still is. This one was taken when he and Meili went to Juncture Ridge together. He was thin, not tall but not short either, gentle and frail-looking, wearing a jogging outfit which didn't quite match his temperament, the peaked cap covering one third of his rectangular face and leaving only his delicate but slightly dumb-looking facial features, his slender hand holding a climbing stick with "Juncture Ridge" carved on it. He turns and looks at the wall behind the bookshelf: the two orange-colored climbing sticks are still hanging there; one was his, the other belonged to Meili. Perhaps his mother forgot to put hers away. He picks up the one that was Meili's

and turns it in his hand. That was a souvenir from the trip which they hadn't sought their parents' permission for. The stick feels extremely smooth, the sensation reminding him of the smooth skin on the back of her neck. He suddenly loses his grip on the stick and it drops to the newly-installed floor, making a clatter.

"Tianlei, did you break something?" his mother calls out.

"No, Mom."

"How come it takes so long to get your clothes off? The water is getting cold."

"Coming." He squats down mechanically to open the suitcase. Lying on top is a large color photo of Yishan, the corners of her mouth upturned and the corners of her eyes turning downward, her lips closed but in a sweet smile. He takes it out and sets it on the desk, gazing at it. She resembles Meili in some ways but he can't say exactly how. That is why his father sent him this photograph a few years ago and instructed him to start writing to her, which he did right away.

He recalls her smiles at the airport and her calling him "Tianlei." All that seemed so natural. He has pondered over this relationship repeatedly in the past several years and still feels awkward about it. Here they are, a young man with a Ph.D. from an American university who is not bad-looking and a girl who looks pleasant and has just graduated from college, yet they had to get acquainted through highly unnatural means.

His coming back is to prove that this love indeed exists between them and he wants to bring it to fruition. However, when he came into his old room again, all the things brought back memories of Meili ten years before. He picks up the climbing stick from the floor, sets it behind the bed against the wall and covers it with the mosquito net. Then he moves Yishan's picture on the desk to cover the words: "Study overseas and a bright future is yours."

The bathroom has a new porcelain tub and next to the tub is a big window facing the side of another house. Through the window he can see all kinds of linen hung to dry and hear the sounds of cards being shuffled mixed with loud female laughter and men's coughing. He is now reassured that he is indeed home. He wants to find out from his mother if the next-door neighbors are still the Jiangs from ten years ago.

After the bath he dries himself, and in a moment he is all sweaty again. He steps into the Japanese-style slippers which Ah-cui laid out for him and goes into his room. He gets a few items and comes out to the living room, and the first thing he does is to turn on the electric fan. His mother brings a big bowl of mung bean gruel for him and turns off the fan right away, saying:

"You just had a bath so your pores are still open. How can you stand having a cold wind blow on you? Oh, here's your favorite mung bean gruel. I stewed it this morning and kept it in the fridge. Eat that and you'll cool off."



He takes a seat where he cannot see the pictures on the wall. Facing him is the small back lawn. Under the low eaves there are numerous pots of roses. That's his father's new job after retirement--growing flowers and raising fish. At the moment his father, with a pipe in his mouth and a bamboo hat on his head, is watering the flowers on the front verandah. Under the shadow of the hat is a dry and bony face. He looks as if he is contemplating something, yet smiles keep coming to his face--he must be feeling happy about his son's coming back. Tianlei, meanwhile, drinks from his bowl, aware that his mother is watching him. To make her happy, he finishes the gruel and asks for more. His mother calls out in great joy:

"Ah-cui, get some more gruel for Young Master."

When he is done eating, Ah-cui hands him a towel. He wipes his mouth with it, takes out a pack of cigarettes and lights one, leaving the cigarette dangling from his lips. He lies back on the couch watching the smoke rise, feeling relaxed and exhausted after the initial excitement. On the north side of Chicago he lives in a four-story red brick apartment building with a living room, two bedrooms and a large kitchen all to himself. In the living room he has a fifteen-hundred-dollar stereo system and in the kitchen various modern electrical appliances. Even so he dreads coming home or waking to a big empty bedroom, watching the sun rise in solitude. Sometimes he drives to the quiet suburbs after work and cruises around

until the lights in the houses along the streets go out one after another and then he'll go home. Now he sits in this tiny living room, experiencing so much love and attention from his mother that he can't even imagine how he ever survived the countless days in that apartment all by himself.

His father comes into the room, takes off his hat, washes his hands and face, then sits opposite him. Tianlei suddenly sits up straight, holding something which he has taken from the suitcase.

"Mom, since I couldn't carry a lot of baggage I didn't bring a whole lot of things back. This diamond ring is for you. I couldn't really think of what I should get for you. Would you like to try it on?"

A big smile appears on his mother's face. She is happy that she has such a dutiful son but she also feels bad about his spending the money. "Tianlei, your mother is already old. How can she still wear this?"

"Why not? Older ladies in the States wear more rings as they get older. They probably even want to wear everything they've got in order to feel secure. See, it fits you perfectly. Do you like it?"

"Yes, yes. But you must have spent lots of money on this. How much did you pay?"

"Mom, is it polite to ask how much a gift costs? Besides, it wasn't all that much."

"Where did you learn all those foreign customs?" She walks

over to the entrance way, a smile still on her face, and turns the ring in different directions to watch the diamond sparkle. Tianlei picks up an electric shaver and says:

"Dad, this is for you. It'll make your shaving easier. Oh, I also got some Cuban cigars. They smell pretty good and I knew you loved cigars."

His father takes a good look at the shaver and then sets it aside. He lights a cigar, draws deeply on it a couple of times and nods his head. "Well, this indeed tastes different. Actually you didn't have to spend all that money since I only shave once every few days. Our life's becoming simpler and simpler. I just grow some flowers and read the papers. Your mother makes new clothes or knits sweaters almost every day for Tianmei's daughter Xiao-rong. We used to go to the movies or play cards once in a while, but we quit doing that since our eyes are getting bad."

"Oh gee, I must have been too excited. I even forgot to ask about Tianmei. Where is she?"

"She asked me to tell you that she couldn't come to the airport today because Xiao-rong wasn't feeling well. She'll be over in a couple of days," says his mother.

"I got a letter from her before I left. She asked me to find a necklace for her. How is she getting along with Dingya now? She doesn't talk much about it in her letters."

"Well, since they are married they'll have to bear with one another somehow no matter how different they are."

Besides, they got together by their own choice. She can't blame anyone else."

"The first two years," his father says, "she wanted to get a divorce and we were strongly against it. Divorce isn't such a trivial thing for us. Look at them now--aren't they getting along pretty well?"

"But sometimes when she comes to Taipei and stays with us she's so subdued. She isn't as lively as before she got married," says his mother.

"She was a girl before she got married; now she's a woman. You can't expect her to keep jumping around all day long," says his father in a sonorous voice.

Tianlei does not think his father's words are fair but he doesn't argue with him as he did before. "The year I left she had a long pigtail, and when I joked with her she'd always say 'There's no way I'm going to want a boyfriend! I don't want anybody to follow me like a shadow; it's so inconvenient!' It's hard to imagine she's not only got a shadow--she's got two of them, a big one and a small one. I really can't picture her being a mother."

His father takes the cigar out of his mouth and, watching him, says, "If you hadn't been so picky, wouldn't you have become a father by now? Isn't that right, Defong? I don't believe you haven't met even one single person who was good enough for you. It must be that you were aiming too high; otherwise you wouldn't have forgotten Meili Zhang."

His mother breaks in at once: "Now that he's back, isn't the problem already solved? Mrs. Chen said if everything went all right she would let Yishan marry Tianlei right away. You want to have a grandchild to hold; wouldn't this be the way to do it?"

"It's not so much me wanting a grandchild; I'm thinking of him. He's already thirty-two or three but still a bachelor. That isn't too good, is it? Those who know him know that his standards are high, but those who don't might think there's something wrong with him."

Tianlei's mother notices his knit brows and the force with which he extinguishes the cigarette. Aware that he is not in the best of moods, she interrupts: "I think you should go and put your clothes on. The Chens are going to be here any minute now."

## CHAPTER TWO

Yishan is in a green dress again, but not the same one she wore to the airport the other day. There is white lace around the neckband, and because the dress is sleeveless, a round smallpox scar shows on her upper arm. Her dress is short and tight, revealing half her knees. In her short hair there is a green ribbon in the shape of a butterfly. She sits right next to Tianlei, yet he feels that a great distance stretches between them. Their difference in age is a factor, but not the only one. Even in his twenties, the American way of life and the loneliness he has experienced in America have made him feel like a middle-aged man: he lived too isolated a life, like a piece of blank paper, yellowed from being under a glass top for too long. When this discolored sheet of paper is placed side by side with a white one, of course the contrast will be evident.

He has barely sat down at a table when a waiter hands him a towel, its warm fragrance reaching him even before he uses it. He wipes his hands, and the waiter, bending low, takes it away. The servile smile on the waiter's face reminds him of something that happened one summer while he was working in Asbury Park, New Jersey. His friend Zude Huang, whom he got to know at Southern Illinois University, had just met a young American widow, and before anybody knew it he married her. Huang, aware that Tianlei was still searching for a summer

job in Chicago, sent him a telegram right away asking him to fill his position. He even sent him an airplane ticket. That was his second year in the U.S., and he thought naively that taking orders and waiting on tables would be the easiest job on earth. When he came to work the first day his supervisor, with a stern face, gave him a long lecture on the regulations of the restaurant, all of which he forgot in a short while. In the evening when customers came in he could not remember which tables he was supposed to serve, and even after he figured that out he served the wrong dishes to two tables. At one of the tables was a group of Irish businessmen, and when they saw that he was confused, they started banging on their plates with the silverware. They called his supervisor, who had to come, bow, and apologize to them. Then the supervisor turned his head toward the kitchen, signaling him to go in there. The moment they got into the kitchen his supervisor yelled at him: "Don't play the college student here. When you're here, you are a waiter. And remember that! If you don't, I'll have no choice but to let you go tomorrow." Even though he was not slapped in the face, it hurt inside, and he blushed beet-red. If he had been at college then, he would have grabbed his tormentor's shirt and shown him his fist regardless of who was stronger. But that day as he stood in the corner facing his boss, he could do nothing except suppress his rage. He did not attempt to talk back, but merely said "Sorry" and returned to the dining room. While

the customers were enjoying their meals, he stood aside trying desperately to hold back his tears. After three months' work in the seaside restaurant he had earned almost fifteen hundred dollars. Not only was he able to handle the orders correctly, he could also hold a tray containing seven or eight dishes with one hand; besides that, he had learned to cook and could qualify as an assistant chef. It is true that he earned money and learned skills; however, his naive imagination and fond dreams had all been shattered, and along with them the satisfaction derivable only from such dreams. What he had gained working there were things which he could acquire anytime; what he lost was lost forever.

"Tianlei, are you all right? Mr. Chen just asked you what kind of wine you wanted." His father's words bring him back to the National Guest House.

"Oh, I don't really drink."

"How can that be? You've lived ten years in the U.S. and you don't drink?" says Mr. Chen. "We also have drinks here like Martinis and Manhattans. We've also got Jinmen white spirits that are really fantastic. Would you like to try that?"

"You must be feeling tired from such a long trip. You should have something to drink," says Mrs. Chen.

Obligingly he nods and the waiter brings the bottle and cups. Yishan had ordered a soda, but all the others wanted the liquor. Mr. Chen, his eyes on Tianlei, raises his cup,



and everyone else follows suit.

"Let me propose a toast: first, to welcome you back; second, to congratulate you on returning with great accomplishments; third, to wish your family a wonderful reunion; and last, but not least, we hope that all your wishes will come true."

Tianlei drains the cup, a hot sensation rushing to his stomach, reminding him of his first drink. That was shortly after he had finished his Ph.D. oral defense. Standing by the college's main entrance he couldn't help feeling excited and nervous, even though he knew he had done quite well in answering all the questions. During his college years he had always held a conviction: if someone can do a job well, I can do it even better. Could it be that after several years as a lone pioneer in the U.S., his spirit had all been eroded away? A moment later, his department chairman, a short, stout and dark-complexioned man, came out and took his hand. "Congratulations, Dr. Moe. Congratulations!" Being called "doctor" for the first time brought back memories of his griefs, hard labor and loneliness during the six or seven years of graduate school. At the same time all the glory and feelings of satisfaction from such an accomplishment were being submerged in those memories. He stood there stunned, images of his past flashing before his eyes: the orchard in the blazing sun, the ladies' rooms at dusk, the restaurant by the seashore. One job after another, all for this Ph.D. What

he received from the chairman's handshake was all he had dreamed of in going overseas to study. But where was the happiness he had been working for? Perplexed, he looked around, his heart filled only with anxiety and emptiness. The chairman told him he was going to hold a small cocktail party for him that evening to celebrate. He went back to his apartment and put on a blue suit, his first suit, and went to Fanny's Restaurant, which he had heard much about but had never been to. He stood uneasily in the restaurant entry and the head waitress, in a tight-fitting black dress, threw a quick and understanding look at him and led him to a small table in the corner. On the table there was a dark blue candlestick with a dish-shaped base to catch the candle drippings; on its outside not a trace of the wax could be seen. It reminded him of a Chinese saying: Tears flow inside. He could hardly believe that he was, right at that moment, experiencing the bitterness of the saying. A waitress came to his table, her body slightly bent forward, a smile on her face, offering to take his order. He lifted his head, and, instead of seeing the waitress, he saw an image of himself with a pleasing smile, his back bent. He felt bitter all over again and in an indistinct voice ordered a steak. He quickly finished it, paid the bill, and walked out of the restaurant. He drove to the chairman's house.

He was the first guest to arrive at the party. He had been to the house on earlier occasions, but this time things were

different. It was not because his department chairman held his hand tight when they shook hands, nor was it because the chairman's wife gave him a big smile--he felt different for his own reasons. He wasn't dizzy with his accomplishments; in fact, his heart felt empty.

He still remembers his first taste of alcohol during the party that evening. Everybody congratulated him, and he drank one glass after another to congratulate himself. He could never recall how he got home that night. All he remembers is that when he woke he vomited his guts out. He rested his head on the bedside, biting his fist, and cried silently. He did not quite know why he cried but he did know that letting his emotions out would make him feel better. He had been strong-willed ever since he was a small boy. When he was bullied by others he would bite his lip rather than let his tears fall. However, after working hard and alone all these years in the U.S., his character became weak. Even things which he should feel happy about sometimes made him sad.

"Tianlei, why don't you stand up and propose a toast to Mr. and Mrs. Chen?" His father's words put an end to his recollection of past events. "During all these years that you've been away, the Chens have given us a tremendous amount of help."

Tianlei rises, holding a cup of Jinmen.

"Mr. Moe has given us too much credit," says Shougong Chen, he and his wife both ready to stand but stopped by

Tianlei. "All right, Tianlei," says Mr. Chen, his eyes on his wine glass. "Let's finish it. Since all of us belong to the same family now, there is no need for such a formal toast. Sit down, Tianlei. Sit down. Help yourself to the food."

After the cold dishes are removed from the table, the hot ones are served. Mrs. Chen picks out some delicacies right away and places them on Tianlei's plate. "Try these," she says. "During all these years that you've stayed in the U.S. you must have missed Chinese food! Every time we came out to eat together, your mother would think of you. Now that you are back you have to eat plenty before you leave again. Yishan, help yourself, too."

Tianlei picks out some food for Yishan, a smile on his face. She thanks him in a soft, low voice and says:

"I can do it myself."

He cannot keep track of how many dishes are being served, and he doesn't have enough time to taste all of them or even to show his appreciation for each one. All he hears is Mr. Chen's repeated requests for him to eat: "Have some more, Tianlei. Here's some diced chicken. . . . There, try some shark fin with cinnamon. I don't think you can get shark fin in the U.S., can you? Oh, this is crispy duck. Come, Tianlei, try a piece. . . . Pass me your bowl. This gourd soup looks quite good. . . . Let's have a little more white wine. Don't be afraid--even if you get drunk, you are home."

The drink burns his throat, his stomach full of all sorts of delicious food, and he hears constantly open and kind remarks about him from people around the table and sees unconcealed expressions of love from Yishan. His muscles, tense from the stress, struggle, and hard work of the ten years in the U.S., become more and more relaxed. He slouches in his chair, letting happiness circulate through his entire body. He looks at the food left over on the table, the half-emptied bottle, the watermelon just brought in, and the hot, scented towel handed to him a short while ago; he watches his parents, Yishan, and her parents, and scans the little square private room reserved for this party, his heart filled with an odd desire: he wants to laugh loudly and shout at the top of his lungs; he also wants to cry, and more than anything else he wants to embrace his parents, Yishan, and her parents. But he doesn't do any of these, for he has passed the age for such show of emotion. More importantly, he is not in the U.S., where gestures of love are displayed in public. Even so, he still feels happy.

After the meal they take him to the evening market at Ximending. Because he has been away for so long, the entire place looks new to him. His favorite little tavern where he often ate is no longer there. His father points to rows of shops that make up the New China Market. The Four Sisters' next to the International Theater, a store which once fascinated him, has been replaced by a fabric store. Inside

there is a heavy smell from the dyes and the room is packed with material in various colors under pale fluorescent lights. The ice-cream shop where he and his friend Tianping Zhang often had sweet-and-sour plum juice has also disappeared. Walking with his parents on one side and Yishan on the other, he feels he is touring an entirely new world. The people in this new world aren't those in his memory. In fact, there are a lot more of them now, and they crowd all the streets and seem much more westernized. He has noticed this change in their behavior, and they generally seem happier than those he knew before. While walking down the streets a strange idea comes to mind: he wants to grab some passers-by and tell them about all the misery he went through during his ten years in the U.S. He also wants to let them know the unexpected satisfaction, mixed with grief, which he has experienced on coming back. But people on the streets simply pass and nobody even notices him--a scholar who has returned from the "Golden Country"! No one looks at him, even though many have eyed Yishan. He feels disappointed and a little jealous, and the joy and satisfaction that he felt in the restaurant is no longer as keen.

"Why don't we find a place to sit and have some coffee?" says Mr. Chen.

"Mr. Chen is so nice," Tianlei's mother says, "but I think Tianlei is quite exhausted. Maybe Yishan can show him more of the place some other time. He is going to stay for a

while anyway. Shouldn't we perhaps all go back and rest?"

"Tianlei can rest first. We'd still love to have you over," says Tianlei's father to the Chens.

"No, I think we'd better go home, too. After this long day, everyone is tired. Let's go back. We'll arrange other activities tomorrow."

After seeing the Chens leave in a taxi, Tianlei and his parents get into their car and head back towards Dongmending. Tianlei now feels tired and sleepy, so he leans against the door. As the car passes a huge square, he suddenly sits up and looks outside. This quiet and dimly lit place isn't new to him. He clearly remembers that ten years ago he frequently rode his bike with his friend Tianping Zhang on the square, his seat set high, one hand on the handlebar, the other halfway into his pants pocket, whistling a well-known old Broadway tune called "Tea for Two." Sometimes he rode his bike with no hands, and if he and his friend saw some girls riding by, they whistled and chased them, making the girls scream, sometimes scaring them to the point of falling off their bikes. A less intimidated girl might turn the tables on them by saying: "Look, I'm going to call the police!" Benevolence Boulevard has nothing except palm trees lining it, and he sees nobody walking there. It was one evening here that Tianlei first met Meili Zhang. His courtship of her was truly meaningful to both of them. The place is still the same, yet he is no longer a youth--he has



become a middle-aged man full of grievances. When he sees this square where he, as a young man, had so much fun, only one wish occupies his mind: Let me be young again!

"Are you okay, Tianlei? Do you feel like you're going to be sick?" asks his mother.

"No, I'm all right." He sits back, feeling weak. "Just a little tired."

The minute he gets into his room he falls on the bed. In the dim light he watches his mother close the mosquito net for him. She places a small oscillating fan on a corner of the desk, turns it on to the lowest speed, and, bending over, closes his suitcase and pushes it against the bookshelf. Then she watches him for a long while and walks out of the room silently. Meanwhile his heart feels like it is being stroked gently, comfortable yet grieved. For so many years he has had to take care of himself. When he is treated so considerately by his mother, it feels both strange and familiar, and his gratitude to her increases greatly. "I must not let her down," he thinks to himself. "I've got to make her happy, even though it may be for just a few months."

Before he is fully awake the second morning, he senses the heat again, the sun shining on his face while his eyes are still closed. He rolls out of bed and walks directly into the kitchen. When he sees Ah-cui, who has a surprised look on her face, he is reminded that he is indeed home, not in his apartment on the north side of Chicago. Although he has



returned home, he has not yet become used to being waited on as he was in his childhood. When he lived in Chicago, the first thing he did every morning after getting up was to go into the kitchen and put on a kettle of water. He then took a shower to wake himself up. By the time he got out of the shower, the tea water was ready. He would make a cup of strong tea and turn the radio on, listening to the morning news or music while shaving. After that, his tea was just cool enough to drink. He always stood by the window, sipping his tea and looking outside, the red fence that enclosed his neighbor's backyard appearing forever the same. In the winter the yard was covered with snow. When summer came, he noticed the willow trees slowly turning green, several lawn chairs placed in the yard for suntanning, and swings for the kids. In the fall, leaves from the elms were all over the yard, and they remained there until covered by mud and snow again in the winter. Although he is home at present, images of his apartment in Chicago and views outside that window still flash in front of his eyes. It is summertime now; wouldn't the kids in the neighborhood be playing on their swings again? It has only been one day, yet he has been in two distinctly different worlds. He shakes his head, and when he discovers that Ah-cui is chuckling to herself he asks her dully:

"Have I really come back?"

Ah-cui covers her mouth with a hand and laughs so hard

that she cannot keep her back straight. Mrs. Moe comes into the kitchen wearing pajamas made from Canton gauze and is surprised to see Tianlei there in merely a T-shirt and shorts.

"When did you get up?" his mother asks. "Why didn't you put on a pair of pants? Go put more clothes on. What do you want for breakfast? I fermented some glutinous rice for you a couple of days ago--I know you used to like it with eggs. Should we do as we did before: throw in a couple of eggs, one well-done and one soft?"

When he hears her mention this favorite food, his mouth starts to water, and he gets excited. He holds his mother and says in a somewhat childish voice, "Mom, you're great. How could you remember that?"

"Why not? Since my head isn't filled with books like yours is, of course I can remember such things. Now look at you--you just got up and you're sweaty already. Why don't you go take a bath? Your father said he's going to take you to visit some friends and relatives after breakfast. Your uncle called and said he was going to hold a welcome-home party for you at noon in Dadong Garden. This evening the Tongs are inviting you to the Malaya restaurant. Tomorrow will be the Yus and the day after tomorrow the Zhengs. . . . It'll be quite a while before all these parties are over. Oh, I just remembered--Tianmei is coming today. Her husband can't get away so she's coming with Xiao-rong."

"Really, Mom? When are they going to arrive? I'll go and meet them."

"I think you should take a bath and get dressed right away. Your father's been waiting for you since early morning."

The way his mother talks to him is the same as ten years before. She still treats him like a child.

When he finishes his rice with eggs his mother insists that he also eat two slices of toast. Then he and his father leave for his uncle's home to visit his grandmother. She is already ninety years old, her eyesight still fine but her hearing no longer sharp. When Tianlei talks with her he has to shout close to her ears, and even then he is not sure if she fully hears or understands what he has said. At any rate, she keeps nodding her head and shouts back at Tianlei as if he were the deaf one. She wants to know if he has come back to get married, and says if so he should have his wedding soon. She can eat only soft food, and after eating she simply stares at Tianlei. Her stare makes him nervous and speechless. His father moves close to her and shouts:

"Of course we have to do that quickly. You will come to his wedding, and maybe someday you'll have a great grandchild to hold, too." He smiles as he speaks, and Tianlei's uncle and aunt also smile to show their agreement. Grandma probably does not hear clearly what has been said but grins anyway, revealing black gums. For some reason Tianlei feels

bad inside although he keeps a smile on his face. Did he really come back to get married? Perhaps he did, or perhaps he didn't. After his affair with Jiali ended that year, his sole spiritual support was Yishan's letters. They provided him with hope and energy to live. He poured all his feelings and dissatisfaction into his correspondence with her and received, in return, her love, which seemed affected in the beginning but gradually became natural.

His parents' purpose in introducing Yishan to him was for them to get to know each other and eventually to get married. His correspondence with her and his declaration of his sentiments were for the same purpose. It is true that he has come back to see his family, but why shouldn't he form another family at the same time? After meeting Yishan he in fact isn't really disappointed. On the contrary he feels that she possesses the youthfulness which he no longer has. If they were joined together, she perhaps might not make him completely happy, but at least she could make him less unhappy. Her liveliness alone would be able to dispel his gray moods. But somehow when people talk about his getting married, he finds it hard to picture himself married to Yishan, and he feels sad.

After they leave his uncle's place, Tianlei's father takes him to see some of his father's old friends. Everybody offers more or less the same compliments, saying that his father is indeed lucky to have such a dutiful and successful

son and that Tianlei has really returned "in silken robes and glory." Naturally his return makes those people think of their own children overseas. Almost all of his father's friends ask him about life in the United States, and he has to lie to almost all of them. Actually he hasn't lied--he has simply concealed the loneliness and dissatisfaction which their children must similarly experience there. He has done so because he does not want to increase their worries about their children.

The welcome-back party given by his uncle at noon is attended by Tianlei's family, his two cousins and their wives. His older cousin manages a hardware store, and the other cousin works for a foreign firm in Taiwan. The wife of the former is an elementary school teacher, while the latter's wife works in a bank. Since he knows nothing about either hardware or foreign business, Tianlei does not know what to say to them. He simply sits there and listens to their compliments, which are mixed with inquiries about his wedding plans. The meal lasts over two hours, and, to him, a person who has spent the past ten years having just a sandwich and a cup of milk in about twenty minutes for lunch each day, it is something incredible. When the meal is finally over, he goes with his father to visit more friends, and by the time they return home it is already evening. He never expected that just having a cup of tea and a brief conversation at each place would be so tiring, even more so

than teaching a whole day of classes. The minute he steps in the door he takes his shoes off and lies on the polished living room floor, saying:

"I'm really exhausted. Dad, can I stay home and rest tomorrow?"

Before his father answers, a woman wearing a purple dress appears in the living room, her hair done up in a bun. She walks toward him, and he jumps up right away to hold her, saying with a smile:

"Tianmei, it's you. How come I didn't see you at the airport?" He lets go of his sister to take a good look at her--she appears the same as in his memory, yet he also feels that she has changed, too. Her eyes, round like his own, still sparkle; however, he sees something other than liveliness in them as well. Her lips used to be her most attractive feature, but they are now painted deep red and hide the youthful appearance they once had. Her chin has changed from sharp to round, losing its former hint of mischievousness. Her body, he is alarmed to discover, has "matured," no longer the charming figure of ten years before. "You still look the same," he says, "except for having gained some weight."

Meanwhile, she has also been observing him. Suddenly she bursts into tears, her crying soundless, tears falling onto her purple dress. "Tianlei, how come you've changed so much? I can't say exactly how, but it's not age. . . . You look

like you've gone through a lot of hardship." He is her only brother now. They used to have another brother who was older than Tianlei. That brother died the year their family came to Taiwan.

What her parents did not notice, or what they did notice but did not say, Tianmei has taken in right away. Tianlei feels heavy-hearted, but at the same time glad. He holds her close in his arms, not saying a word. A little girl with a pair of round eyes and a sharp chin stands by the living room door, staring at him.

### CHAPTER THREE

Tianlei plays with Xiao-rong for a while. After that he and Tianmei go into his room.

There is a four-year age difference between them. When he was in college she was a junior in high school. He always considered her little and called her "Little Girl." But shortly before he graduated he found out that she was in fact more mature than he had thought. Thus, the two of them sometimes exchanged personal views. The evening before he went abroad to study he walked Meili to her home, and when he returned to his room he found Tianmei waiting for him.

"Tianlei, I'm not going to the airport to see you off tomorrow because I hate to see you leave. I came here to say good-bye." She looks into his eyes. "Meili isn't going either, is she?"

He nodded in agreement and sat down in front of his desk, his hands supporting his chin, his elbows on the glass top, and said, "I really don't want to go. Why did Dad decide things this way? I, I just don't want to leave."

"I know what you mean."

"No, you don't." He lifted his head, his eyes watching her. "It's not because of Meili. I simply don't want to go to a place so far away."

"I understand. Tianlei, people always hate going to a new place, just like I didn't want to move to the dorms last



semester even though I knew it would be more fun. I just didn't feel like moving. You would feel the same way, I suppose? Of course my case isn't quite like yours, but I know what you mean."

"Yeah, something like that. You see, what's the good of a literature major going to the United States? Dad wants me to switch to engineering, and that would mean starting all over again. He doesn't know how hard that would be."

"Dad was thinking of you and your future."

"I know. But I'm not sure of myself at all. Besides, I don't know if I can stick it out. And there is also Meili. She's going to have to wait for so many years! Her mother can't live without her, so she'll never let her leave the country. If she has to wait till I finish and come back, I have no idea how long that's going to take."

"Tianlei, I think you are worrying too much. As long as she still loves you, she'll wait for you. Besides, things could change, too. Maybe her mother will change her mind and let her go; you never know. When you get there, don't bother yourself with such things. Remember Uncle's favorite saying?"

"'Don't cross the bridge before you get to it'?" Tianlei asked. Both he and his sister laughed.

Seeing his expression become less clouded, Tianmei went to the kitchen to get the two bowls of mung bean gruel she had left on the shelf to cool. She also brought a small plate of salted peanuts, and the two of them ate and chatted. After

that Tianmei took the dishes back to the kitchen and returned and stood by his door. "Just go, and don't worry. I'll be with Meili often."

Tianlei suddenly became emotional. He turned his head away from his sister and said, "You'll take good care of Mom and Dad?"

"Yes."

"You study hard in school. I'll see you in the States in a few years. Oh, by the way, you're welcome to use my room as a study. I don't mind."

Their house isn't big. It contains two and a half bedrooms, and Tianmei's is the "half" to the left as one enters the door. Her room is small and her bed alone takes most of the space in the room. She did not mind the lack of space at first, but when she entered high school she made many friends and sometimes brought them home. They could only visit in the living room and they felt inhibited there. Thus she started envying Tianlei his room. Once she brought her friends to his room and took out his photo albums for them to look at. They wrote funny poems and left them on his desk. They also dropped their peanut shells all over the floor. When Tianlei came back and saw the whole mess, he became furious and scolded Tianmei to tears in front of their parents. Not only that, he also made Tianmei swear that she would never enter his room again. Because of this incident they didn't speak to each other for an entire week. When he

kindly offered his room for her use before leaving, she was very grateful and excited. "This is great. I promise to keep it the way it is."

As they now enter the room, Tianmei says to him, "See, I haven't changed your room in any way, have I?"

Tianlei pulls out the chair at the desk and asks Tianmei to sit down. He seats himself on the bed and takes out a pack of cigarettes, offers one to Tianmei, but she shakes her head. He lights one for himself and takes a deep drag on it, then lets the smoke out slowly.

Tianmei cannot resist laughing and asks him, "What else have you learned besides showing courtesy to women and smoking, Little Older Brother?"

"I've also learned not to dream."

"Wow, this is indeed a scholar talking." As she looks over the room she murmurs: "Gee, it's hard to believe that after the ten years you've been gone, we are now sitting here again just like before, you and me talking. You still remember our sitting here chatting before you left?"

"Of course, and I've thought of it many times. Do you feel everything's still the same as it was? Well, I guess that can't be--you've become a mother, and so has Meili. Although I'm still single, I feel older than a guy that's been married for ten years, believe it or not."

"I believe it. That's the way you looked when I first saw you." She stares at the large photo of Yishan on the desk

for a long while. "Tianlei, have you come back for her or to see Mom and Dad? Or for something else?"

"It's for all of those, but mainly for a break."

Tianmei watches him, waiting for him to inquire about Meili.

"Meili is also in Tainan, isn't she? Do you see her often?" he finally asks.

"Yes, quite frequently. Tianlei, you have to get her out of your mind completely. She has a good marriage, her husband loves her a lot and he is a very understanding person, too. You wouldn't blame her for not waiting for you, would you? Her mother was very sick at one time, and that Mr. Dong gave her a lot of support, both financially and spiritually."

Tianlei cannot help being blunt: "But does that mean marrying him was the only way to pay him back? Besides, I saved every penny I could at the time and sent all that to her."

"I know. But you were so far away then, and what she needed the most was not money, but spiritual support. She is not the independent type of woman and she relied on her mother a great deal--you know that, don't you? Once her mother got sick, she became frustrated. She did need somebody to depend on but you were not here. You shouldn't blame her."

"Well, that's one of the prices for going abroad to study. I'm not blaming anyone."

"I went to her wedding--I told you that in my letter.

Anyway, I told her you couldn't sleep for three nights in a row when you learned about her wedding, and she felt such pain that her eyes became red. Think about it: she was about to marry somebody else, but was still thinking of you. What more could you expect? When she heard you were coming back she asked me to tell you if you happened to be in the South, she would like you to visit her."

"Has she changed any?" He is eager to know.

His sister laughs. "How can I know since I see her so often? Even if she had, I wouldn't be able to tell. Besides, I never paid much attention to her looks. Of course, when you see her, you'll know right away." She, all of a sudden, seems to understand what he is fishing for, so she adds, "She's still the same, a very nice girl."

Not having seen her in ten years it is hard for him to imagine how nice this "very nice girl" would be now. "So how have you been?" He suddenly changes the subject. "I mean you and Dingya?"

The smile on Tianmei's face starts to fade. "Well, I guess fine. I've stopped dreaming too, though. I remember once hearing somebody say when a woman gets married, she's earned herself a lifelong meal ticket. I guess nothing is free. You have to sacrifice certain things in exchange. I don't know how other women do it, but I gave up my ideals as the cost."

Tianlei looks at her for quite some time, his heart feeling both sad and glad. Maturity has its price, too. It comes

through all sorts of disappointments in life. He is glad that she has become mature, but he is also sad that she no longer expects much out of life. Obviously her attitude has been a result of her loss of the enthusiasm towards life which she had when she first got married. He still remembers what she wrote at the time: "Tianlei, tomorrow I will be married. Even though Dingya isn't a dazzling knight, he is a down-to-earth yet still fun man. He works in Tainan and that's where we're going to set up our small home. He will be working, and I'll be taking care of things at home. When we have a vacation we can spend it at An Ping Harbor, taking a walk there, or sit under the huge tree in front of the Confucius Temple. The person who wants happiness has to seek it, no matter where he is. I have found my happiness and hope you'll find yours soon." There would be no need now for him to ask her what has happened to her "happiness." Even he if did, she wouldn't tell him.

Tianlei's mother walks into the room. She is dressed very neatly. "You two just talked and talked and forgot what time it is already. Mr. Tong called a short while ago and said he will come and pick us up soon. Tianmei, I've arranged your bed for you. Xiao-rong's cot is in our bedroom. Ah-cui's already got your bath ready. Why don't you go and take it now?"

The Tongs had also invited Yishan and her parents, and they let Yishan sit next to Tianlei. During the meal Mr. and Mrs.

Tong, along with their son, Zhiyuan, who came back from the U.S. two years ago and is teaching at Teachers' College, joke about Tianlei and Yishan repeatedly, almost forcing them to announce the big date. Tianlei somewhat regrets that his parents have leaked the word; of course, it would not be good for him to deny it now. But somehow he feels uneasy. It is true he has come back for Yishan's sake, but there is more to it than that! After the dinner, the Tongs insist on taking the whole gang to the Diyi Hotel to dance. As Tianlei enters the hotel, he is taken aback by the discovery that the clerks at the counter, even the elevator operator, all speak in English. Tianmei steps close to him, whispering: "Tianlei, Taiwan has really progressed, hasn't it?" He looks around the extravagant front lobby, the smooth and shiny hallways, the fancy ornaments in slightly poor taste, and the attendants in their white uniforms greeting guests Western style, but he does not know how to answer Tianmei's question. As they enter the hotel bar, he notices a band on the platform playing rock 'n' roll, the dance floor filled with men and women twisting and turning as if they were afflicted with severe stomachaches. If those people didn't have facial features similar to his own, he would have thought he was in a bar in Chicago. A waiter comes up and leads them to a table by the wall, politely pulling out some chairs for the ladies, and asks what drink each of them would like. Zhiyuan Tong jumps in right away: "Dad, ask him to bring a few bottles of

champagne to welcome our American guest."

Tianlei waves his hand and looks rather embarrassed. "I'm not very good at drinking."

"Are you kidding? Who doesn't like champagne? They soak you twenty-some bucks in American restaurants! But here it's a lot cheaper. Why don't you take advantage of it and enjoy yourself?"

"I really can't drink, but I wouldn't mind having a cup of coffee. Thanks, anyway."

Everybody around the table looks at Tianlei, a trace of disappointment visible on each face. They wonder why he would spoil the happy atmosphere of the evening by ordering coffee. Mr. Tong gives the waiter some money and asks him to bring two bottles of champagne anyway. Unable to resist everyone's urging, Tianlei also drinks a glass. Then he stands up and asks Yishan to dance.

Yishan dances gracefully, her steps very light. Tianlei used to dance well but because of lack of practice during his student years in the U.S., his feet do not cooperate. Nevertheless, Yishan is a good dancer and is able to follow him well; thus, in a short while, he has regained his former skill. Yishan is a bit shorter than Meili, her eyebrows at the level of his shoulders, so when he speaks to her he has to push her back a little in order to see her face.

"Now that I'm back I don't have as much to say as I did in my letters. I may be busy for some time. I hope you don't



mind."

"How can I? You've finished your studies abroad and come back; you are a V.I.P. in everyone's eyes, and they all want to treat you. I feel happy for you."

"I've been away for so many years that I'd even forgotten how hospitable the Chinese are. It's only been two days but I already feel unable to keep up with all the activities. I've become used to living by myself, so I like peace and quiet. I just wanted to be with my family and to spend time with you."

"We'll have lots of time together, but we can't afford to make our relatives and friends unhappy."

"I know." Somehow Tianlei feels that they communicated better through the mail. She is the only child in her family and therefore has always had her way. She finished college without encountering any problems and her head is full of romantic dreams from the many novels and poems she has read. For him, writing to her was a nice change from his routine way of life: she was like a small mountain stream, pure, cool, and soft, soothing his heart, which had suffered tremendous strain. He feels that she is different in person, however. He is not sure if it is because he has had too little contact with people all these years, or she has had too much of it on this small and crowded island. She appears more worldly than he had thought and a loss of innocence, of course, is the price of sophistication.

"Do you often come out here?"

"Oh, yes." She raises her head to look at him. She indeed is quite charming, and he also perceives that she is good at putting on makeup. The girls fresh out of college whom he remembers only applied makeup on their lips, yet Yishan has done a meticulous job on her eyelashes and eyebrows as well. Perhaps girls today have changed. A nostalgic longing for those girls who had long braids and rode bicycles forms in his mind.

"You dance here frequently, too?"

"Yes. Zhiyuan has often brought me here. Besides him, I never went out with anyone. Your parents know that." She tries to explain herself.

In fact, he wasn't questioning her, but her answer embarrasses him. She is much more sophisticated than Meili, who, he remembers, was always very innocent. Naivete is a quality he lost in his second year abroad. At that time he was Yishan's age now and would be considered a grown-up young man. He spent his first summer in the U.S. driving a truck in the mountains. The second summer he went to a ranch in the West and looked after cattle and sheep. It was during that time that he matured into an adult and lost the impractical ambitions he had when he was young.

"Of course you should go out and have fun. I wasn't blaming you. What do you think of Zhiyuan Tong?"

"Oh, he's fun. He talks about interesting places like

gambling cities in Nevada, Florida beaches, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles. . . . He's been to all of them." As she speaks her face brightens in the soft red light, her eyes full of admiration. "Of course, you've seen all those places too, haven't you?"

"Yeah, most of them. When I was in Nevada I was working on a ranch. In New York I worked as a waiter in a restaurant that was located on a mountain, and I drove a big truck through Los Angeles. If you want to have fun, you've got to have the money to pay for it, but I didn't."

"You've lived in Chicago for quite some time. Is that an exciting place?"

He looks at the crowd around them and says, "It's about the same as here."

The moment they return to their table, the band starts to play again, the sound of drums and gongs deafening their ears. Zhiyuan Tong gets up right away from his chair and waves to Yishan. She looks at Tianlei with an excited expression and Tianlei rises immediately to pull her chair back for her. When she is gone, he sits back in his chair. Tianmei cannot help giggling when she sees her brother acting so gentlemanly, and he shrugs his shoulders. Yishan's mother notices all this and says to Tianlei's mother:

"Even though Yishan has graduated from college, she is still so much like a child and loves things like rock 'n' roll. Actually Tianlei isn't much older, but he looks very

mature."

"You have no idea how wild Tianlei used to be before he left," says Mrs. Moe. "At that time you could hardly ever find him at home. While he was in the third year in high school. . . Tianlei, you wouldn't mind my telling this now, would you? While he was in the third year, I don't know what had happened but he and someone once agreed to fight under the Ying Bridge. He wasn't nearly so strong, so that guy beat him up and even stabbed him with a knife. Look." She reaches across the table for Tianlei's right hand. On one side of his thumb is a scar left from the knife wound. "When he came home he didn't dare to let us know what had happened to him, so he and Tianmei washed the wound and bandaged it themselves in the kitchen. Because they didn't wash the cut thoroughly, it got infected the next day, and he had to stay home for a whole week in order for it to heal. When he first went overseas I was so worried about him. I was afraid he would buy a car, but he promised he wouldn't. Later a friend of ours went to the States and visited him. He came back and told us Tianlei had changed completely, and that he acted totally like an adult. I was so relieved when I heard that."

"When our Yishan goes there, I'm sure she'll grow up, too," Mrs. Chen says, her eyes fixed on Tianlei. "You'll have to help her then."

Tianlei smiles awkwardly and turns to watch Yishan. The dance floor is packed with people twisting and turning, some

women's skirts swirling out from their legs. Two American sailors sitting next to their table stare at those women's bare calves and the thighs above the knees, and they lift their eyebrows to one another. The circular movement of the skirts makes one think that the people who are in them are tired of their ordinary life and are trying to jump out of their confined circles, but in spite of their repeated attempts they cannot. Yishan and Zhiyuan Tong are dancing at the edge of the crowd, her hips and arms moving rhythmically and in opposite directions, her short hair bouncing up and down, her face beaming from excitement and intense movement, her eyes sparkling with delight. Her sweet mouth is partly open, displaying her exquisite teeth in the multi-colored lights. He suddenly feels far away from Yishan. Before he came back, he had believed that they had a close relationship: the countless letters they had exchanged connected them across the vast expanse of the ocean. But now he feels that she is very distant, and it is true a big crowd comes between them. The people in the crowd are his compatriots, yet they are unfamiliar to him.

She is dancing in the crowd, and others are also dancing. They together form a harmony, and she is part of it. He, however, is a stranger to this whirlpool. When he went to parties given by Americans or spent time with American friends, he always felt he was a stranger, an outsider who was not a part of their country, their organizations, or their

amusements. But he did not feel sorrowful, for he had a consolation: my stay here is but temporary. I won't be an outsider forever. Someday when I return to my own land and I'm among my own people, I will not feel this loneliness any more, because then I will be a part of them and become one with them. Yet now, at the very moment when he is among his own people, speaking his own language, and sitting in the midst of his relatives in this luxurious hotel ballroom, he suddenly feels an inexplicable sorrow and loneliness. Yishan is whirling, Tianmei is laughing, his parents are talking in high spirits, but somehow he feels distant from all these. He still has the feeling that he is outside their circle; he feels lonely while watching others having a good time. It's not that he does not want to be merged with them; his ten-year solitary life overseas has had such a strong stiffening effect on him that neither his family's warmth nor his girl-friend's tenderness can loosen him up. All his ideas and beliefs have become separated from theirs. Their amusement, to him, seems so trivial, even though he himself is uncertain as to what kind of enjoyment he is looking for.

"Hi, Tianlei, would you like me to ask you to dance?" Tianmei touches his hand lying on the table. Now the frenzied rock 'n' roll is over, and the band is playing a soft song, "On a Sunday Morning." This old song has brought back memories of the balls at classmates' homes on North Sun Yat-Sen Road and the times when he accompanied Meili back to her dormitory in

the bright moonlight, humming "On a Sunday Morning. . . ."

He takes Tianmei down to the dancing floor, faint images of those far-off events, those far-off emotions, and that far-off self lingering in his mind.

"Tianlei, what's gotten into you tonight? Uncle Tong is so nice as to invite you to come here tonight. You must not let them down. You seem so absent-minded!"

He smiles, feeling guilt. "Maybe it's just that I'm not used to this kind of life. Say, you're not a bad dancer. Often go dancing with Dingya?"

She shakes her head. "No, not very often. Why, can't you tell I'm not so good at these new styles of rock? Yishan is good at them. Don't you think so?"

"Yeah. She says Zhiyuan Tong and his wife often take her out."

"I've heard that, too. Mom says it's a good thing you came back. Though Uncle Tong's son didn't come back with a Ph.D., he's good with young ladies. It seems Yishan quite admires him. You've got to be careful there."

"Me careful? That's Yishan's own business. Stop thinking like everyone else does, assuming that my only purpose in coming back is for her. Actually I've thought about coming back every year, but each time I put it off. It's not just my missing home; I got scared living there all by myself."

"I understand. I'm only living in Tainan, but often I want to come home, too. Of course, for you it would be more so."

Oh, can I ask you why, since you've lived in the States for so many years and also in quite a few different places, and you look quite sharp, why in all these years you didn't ever have a girlfriend and had to come to Taiwan to look for one?"

This "why" could take a whole book to explain. He spent the first several years both working and studying. As a liberal arts student in an English-speaking country, whose background in English was not so strong, it already took him most of his waking hours competing with others in their native language. In addition, he also had to work to earn a living. How could he still have the spare time, energy, or money to make friends? Girls, especially those who have gone abroad, have thrown all their lofty dreams of love into the sea. If you want to go after them, you've got to have a car first--he did not; you have to know where to take them--he didn't know; you need to have a secure future--his was bleak; you must have a Ph.D. mortarboard in view--all he had was a billed cap given to him by the owner of an orchard. He had nothing, and thus he dared not go after anyone. Certainly there might have been girls who would be interested in his bookish appearance and taciturn nature, but he really had no time to seek out such girls. After only one or two years' study overseas, his "pioneering spirit" was completely gone. When he was done with his master's degree, however, he did try once. Zude Huang arranged a "blind date" for him and the four of them went out together. The girl's family name was, perhaps, Jiao--he was



no longer sure. Her appearance was delicate, just like the tender girls described in traditional Chinese fiction, but her affected manners were sickening; when she ate, she appeared as if she were too fragile to hold the chopsticks. After the meal, they all went to a drive-in movie, Zude Huang and his girlfriend clinging tightly together in the front seat, he and his "blind date" sitting far apart in the back. There are many advantages to going to an outdoor theater: when a family comes, the couple can enjoy the movie while their kids sleep in the back seat; when lovers come, they can watch the movie while continuing their intimate talk; when boys come, they can indulge in their loud and empty arguments and, above all, they can--if there is a group of girls in a nearby car--make silly remarks about their appearance. If they are lucky, they may perhaps get acquainted with the girls and become friends. . .

"Zude told me you just got your degree," Miss Jiao says.  
"Where are you going to work?"

"Oh, I've got to keep studying. I'm going to work for a Ph.D."

"What? The degree you got wasn't a Ph.D.?"

"No."

The girl suddenly became speechless, her previously sweet-smiling face now completely blank. A little while later, she tapped on the boy in the front seat and said, "Zude, I have a bad headache. Could you take me home right away?" Her voice

was no longer soft; it was dull and dry.

"What happened, Tianlei? Anything wrong with you today? You're not answering my questions and you don't seem to be enjoying the dance. What's the matter?" Tianmei asks him. "You are not acting like a hero returning home," she says as she pushes the hand resting on his shoulder.

Having no choice, he smiles, now putting his entire mind to dancing with her. "It's all because you asked 'why.' That made me think back to a lot of things."

"Yet you still can't come up with an answer?"

"Well, I could if I wanted to, but this is not the right time or place. I'll fill you in on the details later."

## CHAPTER FOUR

Because he has had too much coffee, Tianlei cannot fall asleep. He lies in bed, his eyes staring at the mosquito netting above him while images of different women's faces pass in front of his eyes--Meili, Tianmei, Yishan, and Jiali. The faces are either laughing, crying, or looking angry. Meili's appearance always seems indistinct; after all, it has been ten years since he last saw her. He has learned from Tianmei that Meili has permed her hair. The Meili he remembers, however, was a girl with a short, thick braid, from which stray hairs stuck out. Her wardrobe included a white blouse, several skirts with different colors and designs, a dark gray wool winter coat, and a brown raincoat with many black ink spots on one cuff. Her build was slender and rather fragile. According to Tianmei, Meili has become heavier, yet somehow he cannot picture her that way. They say that after childbirth, women often lose their figures, gaining weight around the waist and abdomen. Since he cannot imagine that happening to her, she seems all the more remote.

Rolling out of bed he reaches beneath it for his briefcase, which contains all his important documents, letters, an appointment calendar, and several books he wants to read. One of the books is a collection of short stories by Kafka, and between the pages there is a photograph of a woman. He removes the photo and walks to the door. Assured that

everyone is asleep, he closes the door and turns on the desk lamp. Under the pale light, he places Yishan's photo side by side with the picture from the book and looks at them attentively.

The face in the photo from the book is entirely different. Yishan's face is like the sun--its dazzling brightness makes one aware of its presence. The face from the book, however, is like a cloud--one senses its presence but isn't always aware of it. This face is delicate yet serious. It does not shine; however, one cannot resist the temptation to explore its color and shape. It exudes a sense of beauty; yet where the beauty lies, it is hard to say.

The sun can be felt by everyone, yet a cloud has to be seen. The photo from the book has a face with an indecisive quality that makes a person look at it twice. Her brow is relaxed, but her eyes are filled with worry from adult responsibility and pains. The outline of her nose shows strong character, and her warmth is gathered around her closed lips. There is a hint of irrepressible self-will about the small, round chin which protrudes slightly with an upward curve, and the two lines around her mouth indicate her attempt at repressing her own willful character. She is not a beautiful woman; she can hardly be called good-looking; however, she is a woman full of attraction and mystery, her face showing signs of maturity not found on younger women. In this black-and-white picture, she wears a dark dress, and

in her hair a bright silvery pearl, her only jewelry, which makes her eyes, dress, and hair appear even darker, and the lips seem more delicate.

Tianlei lowers his face, touching his forehead to the photo on the desk, remembering the love he had shared with Meili. After they parted, he missed her constantly. When he learned of Meili's marriage, he tore her pictures to pieces and cried secretly. Later, gathering the pieces and trying to reassemble them, he wept again. It had been the first time he fell in love, and also the sweetest moment of his youth. The feelings between himself and Yishan, however, are different. Their marriage would be one of convenience for both. Her letters provided him with hope to live on, hope for a bright future. When he saw her the first time as he stepped down the plane ramp, he immediately felt that she was lovely. If he decided to marry her and later to help her become accustomed to American life, it would be because he wanted to treat her like his own sister. His affair with Jiali was long past, but he could never forget it, and those emotions had burned his heart and left a permanent scar. It should not have happened, but it was an unavoidable "coincidence."

After finishing his master's degree at Southern Illinois, he transferred to a Catholic university that offered him a scholarship to work on his Ph.D. Several Chinese professors were teaching there, most of whom had families. However,

because of his withdrawn nature and his busy schedule, he did not have many chances to get close to them. Occasionally, a married couple would invite some students to dinner. Those who talked freely on those occasions already knew each other; those who came as strangers left the party the same way. Each time he went with great expectations, hoping to enjoy a good Chinese meal, meet some new people and become close friends with those who shared interests similar to his own.

He also wished to get better acquainted with the married couples, hoping that their family warmth would lessen his loneliness. Unfortunately, he left every time disappointed, because the men at the party with status had their own topics: politics, stocks and bonds, personnel changes at the school, or research projects. The ladies dwelt on topics that are universal for their sex: clothes, prices, and other trivialities. The other graduate students fared no better than Tianlei himself, constantly trying to come up with something to talk about, eating as much as possible, and doing their best to express their deep-felt appreciation as their hosts accompanied them to the door. Although their stomachs were full, their hearts remained empty.

Tianlei wished desperately to become a part of the crowd, but he could not, for he had spent too much time alone during the past several years.

Jiali came into his life the year he was struggling with his dissertation. Her husband had accepted a teaching

position at this school and she, of course, came along. The first time Tianlei met this couple was at a picnic in September when Professor Zhao introduced them to the students. When he shook hands with Mr. Lu, Jiali's husband, he discovered that the man's hand was unusually soft, his fingers extra long. It was easy for Tianlei to feel the difference because his own hands were calloused from years of manual labor.

"What are you going into?" inquired the man.

"Journalism," Tianlei responded. He had been asked such questions so many times during the past several years that his answers had become formulaic. People would almost always begin with "What are you working on?" and then proceed to "When did you come here?" "Which school are you studying at?" "Did you come straight from Taiwan?" "What are your plans after you graduate?" A more inquisitive person might also want to know "Do you have a girlfriend?" "What other people do you have in your family?" or "Do you have any brothers or sisters who are also in the U.S.?" and so on and so forth. The questions were always along the same lines.

"How long have you been in the U.S., Mr. Moe?"

Before he had a chance to reply, a young woman walked toward them. She had a child with her. If it hadn't been for the child, Tianlei wouldn't have thought she was married. The child went off somewhere and she came up to her husband. The man did not look straight into her face, but her presence

obviously put him more at ease.

"Oh, this is Jiali, my wife," he turned and said. "And this young gentleman is Mr. Moe. He goes to school here."

"Tianlei Moe," he said quickly.

She held out her hand, which he hadn't expected; he shook it and, to his surprise, discovered that her hand was less soft than her husband's. It was not coarse, either. It was a hand which showed her determined character.

"Tianlei Moe?" She tilted her head to one side as she tried to recall something. He now had a chance to take a closer look at her face. Although her features were not extraordinary, what interested him was the look on her face, a look which displayed a young woman's tenderness and an adult's understanding. "I have a sister who had a classmate in high school named Tianmei Moe. Is she by any chance related to you?"

His face suddenly lit up like a little boy's. "That's my sister. Then your sister must be Jianian Huang. Right?"

"Yes, that's her," she exclaimed excitedly, her eyes brightening as she continued. "Yes, of course you're her brother--your eyes are just like hers. How is she? Is she also in this country?"

"She's in Taiwan, married, and has a child."

"Really?" Tianlei noticed that "really" was one of Jiali's favorite expressions. When she used it, her face had a childlike, surprised look, and at the same time it seemed she



was also playing a word game, her eyebrows raised, her face full of charm. "Time really goes fast, doesn't it? The Tianmei I remember is just a child, who liked to wear pants and always played with her hair as she talked. Really! Married already!" Her eyes--not big or exceptionally beautiful, yet so sparkling that it was hard to stare into them--looked him up and down. "Since my sister is a good friend of your sister's," she said, "then we should be good friends, too. Whenever you have time, please drop by our house."

"Yes, please do," said Boyuan Lu. "When we lived in the East, we often had students who came over to visit us. We enjoyed their company. I was so afraid my wife wouldn't be used to living in a small town like this."

Only a few words, but Tianlei could already see how Boyuan Lu felt about his wife and how hospitable Mrs. Lu was. "Of course," Tianlei said right away. "I'll have to tell Tianmei about this."

Jiali looked at him, wanting to laugh but holding it back. "Boyuan, why don't you two continue your talk while I go and look for our son? Oh, don't forget to give Mr. Moe our address and phone number."

Shortly after he met the Lus, Tianlei went to a picnic attended by between fifty and sixty Chinese. No matter how small a town is in the United States, one can just about always find Chinese there. The Chinese are like sea weed--

once intertwined, the colony becomes bigger and bigger. Two students brought their foreign wives to the party. One of them was a Mr. Guan, a shy man, whom Tianlei knew. Despite his timid personality, he had found a charming and talented German wife who possessed a most desirable combination of qualities from different cultures--the Germans' hardworking and persistent attitude, the Americans' frank and straightforward character, and in addition Guan also put some traditional Chinese values such as obedience and self-sacrifice into her head, which, of course, was beneficial to him. As a result, he had become the envy of many Chinese students there. The other student was a Mr. Gu, who had married an American. She, except for her blonde hair and an hour-glass figure, had almost all the shortcomings of American girls. She was not career-minded but was also dissatisfied with being a housewife. She was neither willing to mingle with the Chinese, nor willing to see her husband slighted by Americans. Thus, she and her husband had become an isolated couple. Tianlei had been to their place on several occasions and couldn't stand the discordant atmosphere. He and Gu used to wash dishes in the same cafeteria, and after work Gu sometimes offered him a ride to his apartment, and then stayed there for hours. There were a number of occasions when he wanted to ask him why he hadn't married a girl from his own country. Tianlei himself wouldn't consider marrying a girl who was not Chinese, not only because they would have

different backgrounds, but also because they would have different plans for the future. After all, how can a Chinese person settle permanently in the United States?

Frequently Americans tend to go to an extreme in their thoughts about other people and events, holding a naive view that since their money has been spread in every corner of the world, people everywhere, naturally, should accept their ways of thinking. The arrogant attitudes of some of Tianlei's classmates had already become unbearable to him, and, therefore, it would be out of the question for him to marry a person of this kind.

Numerous onlookers surrounded the dozen or so grills on which steaks, hamburgers, and hot dogs were being cooked, some giving a hand, some only getting in the way. A circle of people were playing catch with a volleyball. On the badminton court were another four, two of them professors, one a student, and the other Boyuan Lu's wife. Tianlei noticed that she was in a sleeveless white shirt and maroon Bermuda shorts with little square designs. Her figure was like American girls' in every way except her legs were not particularly slim and long. Her moves during play were nimble, and it was clear that she enjoyed and was good at sports. Tianlei walked over to a barbecue grill trying to help, and in the distance he could hear the sound of her laughter from time to time. She threw her head back as she laughed unreservedly. Gu, Tianlei's comrade in the cafeteria, looked in that direction

several times, and, seeing no professors around him, whispered to a friend nearby, "Gee, isn't Mrs. Lu terrific? She's so lively . . . so different from the other women!"

"My brother studies in New York," said the other student. "He went to her home quite often before she and her husband moved here. My brother wrote and told me about the Lus' coming. He also said Mrs. Lu was a graduate of Taiwan University and got her master's degree from the University of Michigan. After that, she married Mr. Lu and writes novels at home."

"Wow, a woman writer! No wonder she's different," said Gu. "What has she written?"

"I'm not sure. She uses a pen name for her novels. My brother mentioned it but I forgot."

"A woman writing novels, huh?" Guan cut in. "I bet you she only writes about things that don't matter to anyone. See, their entire world is just their house. What miracle can you expect from their books?"

This comment provoked Tianlei, who had to defend his former profession: "Austen, Gaskell, Mansfield, Woolf, George Sand were all women!"

"Guys, be careful," said Gu. "We dare not argue with our friend Mr. Moe who has spent four dreamy years in the literary world. Even though he's switched to journalism, what he admires the most are still the writers, because he'll never be one."

"It's not a matter of whom I admire. It's simply the tone with which you talk about women in any profession, which I think. . . ."

"Hey, flip that piece right away, or somebody's going to have to eat a burned steak."

When all the steaks were finally ready, the ladies opened the salad bowls and poured iced tea for everyone. The men sat on the grass, leaving the tables for the women and children, and everyone talked while they ate. After so many years in the United States, Tianlei still wasn't excited about American food. On ordinary days, no matter how busy or tired he was, he would always make some Chinese food for himself, most of the time by simply opening a can of chicken broth and adding it to noodles. Sometimes he made a whole pot of braised pork on Sunday, enough to last the week; the first day he would eat the pork with rice, the second day make noodles with the sauce, the third day eat cold sliced meat, the fourth day add a little vegetable to the pork, the fifth day make soup with what was left over, and the sixth day just looking at it would make him feel full. Even so, he still preferred to eat at home rather than in a restaurant. Not being crazy about American food was one reason, but another was he could not bear the awkwardness of eating alone in a restaurant. There were two Chinese restaurants in his neighborhood, but the food they served was all Cantonese, specifically adapted to American tastes, so for a Chinese student like him, who

knew what genuine Chinese cuisine was like, such food was not very inviting. Once he went to one of the restaurants and ordered a steamed fish with soybeans and had to wait for over an hour before he was served. Because he ordered only one dish and that particular one took longer to prepare, the waiter was indifferent to him. By the time he started eating, the intensity of his hunger had already subsided; on top of that, the dish was cold and salty. So he left a penny on the table, paid the bill and left, and never returned to that place. He and some friends did, however, go to the other restaurant frequently. Their dishes all had pretty much the same taste with tenderizer, sugar, and Accent as the main seasonings, the food so sticky in the mouth and throat that it took pots of tea to thin the glueiness.

The steaks at the picnic that day tasted especially delicious since the ladies had marinated them in soy sauce, onions, black pepper, and garlic powder before putting them on the grill, and their flavor was enriched by the charcoal. Tianlei was in a good mood, so he ate more than he usually did. After eating he helped clean up, and then played volleyball with a group of people. He had never been a sports enthusiast, but that day he actually enjoyed playing, and he was quite exhausted but relaxed when the games were over. People started leaving at dusk, and Tianlei made a special point of saying good-bye to the Lus. Mrs. Lu urged him to visit her home, and he accepted the invitation graciously,

then took off in Mr. Gu's car to return to his apartment.

Actually he should have written to Yishan that evening, but since he was tired and couldn't concentrate, he made an exception and excused himself from the task. School started the next day, and because he was a T.A., he had to devote part of his time to grading undergraduates' papers and tests for professors. His advisor had just returned from a trip to the Middle East and wanted to know about his progress with his dissertation, so he became busier than ever.

When he was at Taiwan University, what he hated the most was lack of time. Sometimes he had three classes in the morning and had to stay in the library the whole afternoon to consult reference books so that he could write his papers in the evening. On such days, he wouldn't be able to see Meili at all. He always looked forward to Tuesday and Thursday afternoons because both he and Meili had no classes then, and they would ride their bikes to the Pool of Translucence. During those years leisure was a luxury for him; however, when he came to the U.S. he found that nothing was more dreadful than free time, because he had no place to go, and he couldn't stand being confined to his apartment, either. On some weekends he locked himself in his tiny office but could neither set his mind on studying nor get up the courage to go any place. Weekends in America can drive single people crazy, for no matter where a person goes--be it a theater, a restaurant, a park or any other public place of amusement--he

will always find people in pairs. The only exception is bars, places where bachelors and those who have fallen out of love gather, joined by husbands who have had fights with their wives, people who have lost their spouses, and men whose wives are away from home. These people just sit at the bar and buy drinks or find somebody for a one-night stand. Tianlei did not drink, so he stayed away from those places. He didn't think it was appropriate for him to bother those who had families, and neither did he desire to spend time with students who were in situations similar to his own, for when such people got together, all they did was complain to each other, and he didn't want to make himself feel worse by listening to more troubles. Thus, he preferred to lead a busy life. In the morning he would go to the university and do the job required of him. Then he would work on his dissertation. In the afternoon he would attend a lecture if there was one, and after that ride his bike around a small lake near the school until the muscles in his legs became tired. After supper he would get on his bike again and return to school to continue struggling with his dissertation, staying there until midnight. By the time he got back to his apartment, he would be so tired that he couldn't think straight and had to go to bed right away. It was not that he enjoyed such a monotonous life; he just couldn't find a way to change it.

Because of his full schedule, he had forgotten about Mrs. Lu's invitation to visit, and she did not come looking for



him, either. But one day as he was shopping for a birthday present for Yishan, he ran into Mrs. Lu in Steven's, and she was happily surprised to see him again.

"Haven't seen you for quite a while," she greeted him. "Why haven't you come to our place to visit us? We've been spending much time lately trying to get things organized, and that's why I haven't had a chance to give you a call. Anyway, what are you here for?"

He suddenly blushed, and Mrs. Lu noticed it right away.

"Oh, I see. You're getting a present for your girlfriend. Right? What's she like? If you describe her to me, I might be able to give you some suggestions. Is she just a friend or someone special?"

He smiled with an embarrassed look, his face still red.

Mrs. Lu was very understanding and said, "Well, if it's such a personal matter, I won't interfere. But when you have time, please do drop by our house. Bring her along, too."

"I can't," he stuttered, "because she's in Taiwan."

"Really?" She looked at him with a teasing expression in her eyes. "That's a bit too far, isn't it?" She sighed. "Then that adds another reason for you to come and visit. You must be quite lonely living by yourself, aren't you?"

"All right, I'll come."

She left, and he still stood there stunned. Actually he very much wanted her advice on selecting a gift, because each time he wanted to buy something for Yishan, making a decision

was even more perplexing than writing a report. When he wrote to her and asked her what she liked, she always said anything would make her happy, as long as it was from the United States. He could not buy her clothes, because he didn't know her size. He had sent some chocolate to her, but she told him customs duty on it was very high. He did not know the reason but didn't dare to send more. As for cosmetics, he really didn't know much about them, so each time he only got her some lipstick. Even he thought that was too unimaginative. Mrs. Lu, in fact, should be able to offer him good advice on buying things for women, but he didn't dare ask her since he was afraid that her open and straightforward personality would lead her to inquiring about Yishan. What would he say then? If he told Mrs. Lu that he and Yishan had become acquainted through the mail, what would she think about that? Would she regard him as so incompetent that after living this many years in the United States, he had to settle for some girl he had not even met from all the way across the ocean? Certainly he did not think he would be disgraced by Yishan; it was the way they had met about which he felt uncomfortable.

A clerk came up to him and asked if he needed any help. Tianlei answered mechanically: "Just looking, thanks."

He looked around for a long time before finally deciding on two small bottles of Evening in Paris perfume, two tubes of newly developed, light-sensitive lipstick, a pair of Italian silk scarves for Yishan, and also some makeup for

Tianmei. He went home, wrapped up the presents, and headed for the post office. His heart felt lighter after the package was sent.

Tianlei, however, continued putting off visiting the Lus, especially after Mrs. Lu had said that he must feel lonely living by himself, for if he had visited her place after their conversation, that would have proven that Mrs. Lu's assumption was correct. The lonelier a person gets, the harder he has to try to hide it, because once he arouses other people's sympathy, his loneliness will become even more unbearable.

One evening as he was riding his bike around the small lake, he happened to see Mrs. Lu walking with her son. It was late fall, and she had on a pair of cream-colored pants and an Italian red sweater. He waved, got off his bike, and approached her.

"Hello, Mrs. Lu. Nice to see you again."

"Hi, Tianlei. How are you? Boyuan has gone out West to present a lecture, and I didn't feel like making supper at home, so the two of us went to the Golden Phoenix and had some chow mein. The food wasn't bad, but it was awfully expensive. The Chinese restaurants in New York had better food, and their prices were more reasonable."

"You liked living in New York?"

Her son was looking for Coca-Cola bottle caps on the lawn, and she sat down on a bench and said, "New York is like a kaleidoscope. It's got all kinds of people and many different

things going on all at once. Some people think it's too noisy and nerve-wracking. I wasn't used to it in the beginning, either, but after a while, I started to like it. In fact, New York's got more than various kinds of entertainment; it gives you 'food for thought' as well. All the events and people around you make you want to explore the place more. As a result, your life seems less boring."

"That's because you're a writer," said Tianlei. "When you live in a place like New York, you get more material to write about."

"Really?" She laughed, lifting up the collar of her sweater to cover her neck. "A 'writer,' what an elegant title for me! Actually I just ran out of things to do at home and took up writing to kill some time; that's all. All I've written about are things around me, and that's a good way for me to reduce my frustrations." Then, turning to her son, who was still searching for Coke caps, she asked, "Are you cold, sweetheart? Come over and let me feel your hands. Gee, they are cold. I think we should go back now. Tianlei, would you like to come over and have a cup of coffee?"

He hesitated for a moment, his hands on the handlebars. Boyuan Lu was away from home. To an American, his going to her place now wouldn't raise anyone's eyebrows, but if it were found out by other Chinese, it would be unforgivable. But he was really lonesome and desperately needed a companion. To go to her place and to chat sounded very tempting.

Jiali, aware of what he was thinking, said with a smile, "Come on. Don't be afraid. When we lived in New York, students often came to our place when Boyuan wasn't home."

Both of them had studied literature. Jiali was an understanding woman, and Tianlei was in desperate need of companionship; thus, after going to her place the first time, he couldn't refrain from visiting her again. If he had not felt an attraction for her, his spending time with her would have been all right. But his feeling for this woman had passed beyond mere appreciation. On the other hand, had Jiali not been interested in exploring other people's minds, had she not liked reading or writing novels, or daydreaming, she would not have discerned his interest in her or understood his plight and then given him companionship, and more. From the first time they met, Jiali had noticed his shyness with her, and she knew why. What she did not know, however, was the consequence of her repeated invitations. Tianlei had felt close to her from the start, but he had no idea what was going to result from his feelings. Maybe both of them really knew what the outcome would be but could do nothing about it. Their relationship started that fall and lasted all the way into the winter, and when they wanted to end it, it was already too late. It was like a flood tide which came so swiftly that before they realized it, it had washed away the ground from under their feet.

## CHAPTER FIVE

He turns off his desk lamp, gets into bed, and closes his eyes. Even though he feels tired after a full day's activities, he is unable to fall asleep. Coffee never kept him awake before. Maybe the coffee he had at the hotel was stronger than what he has been used to, or maybe he is still suffering from jet lag. It should be daytime in the U.S., yet the sound of a flute nearby reminds him it is night here. Could it be the masseur, who walks the streets at night, playing his instrument? As an undergraduate at Taiwan University, he sometimes walked Meili back to her dorm on Saturday nights, and on his way home, mostly after midnight, he would see noodle stands and pedicabs along the deserted streets. If the weather was cold, the drivers huddled under the tarpaulins of their vehicles. On a hot night they either dozed on the seats or nearby, their fatigue carrying them off to peaceful dreams. At this time of the night he often saw a masseur with a somber face stroll along the streets playing a flute, his music melodious yet melancholy. The rest of the world had all gone to bed, but the masseur kept on strolling, the sound of his flute accompanying people as they drifted into dreams.

It has been so many years since he last heard the flute, its tone sounding both new and familiar, reminding him of his college years. How he misses those worry-free days. He rolls

from the bed, walks softly through the corridor and the living room, picking up his shoes by the door and sneaking out. Then he puts his shoes on and hurries to the end of the alley. He looks around but finds no masseur. He walks further and at the intersection of Xinyin Road and Hangzhou Street South spots a person in black carrying a flute in his hand. He stops before reaching the man. Do I need a massage, Tianlei asks himself. No, all he wants is to have a few words with him.

He wants to tell him that his flute has brought back many memories, that when he heard the music he felt he had indeed come home and was finally among his own people. But how can a masseur understand all this? What this man needs is money, money to support his family and himself. How can he comprehend the desires of someone who already has a doctorate, a secure job, and a good income? Would a person striving to make ends meet know that there are worries in the world other than survival?

He turns and heads back toward the alley he came from. A few street vendors are still selling deep-fried dough twists at the end of the alley, and several pedicab drivers are having a late meal while waiting for customers. The delicious smell reaches him and he feels his pockets for some change as he approaches a stand. The owner, seeing Tianlei come up, puts the spatula down, wipes his hands on a greasy rag draped over his shoulder, and greets him with a smile:

"Young Master Moe, you are still up. Would you like to have a pair of dough twists?"

Tianlei is taken aback. He hasn't been to this stand since coming home. How did the owner know his name? Seeing the puzzled look on Tianlei's face, the vendor explains.

"Your father often comes and patronizes our small business. Before you came back, the Master told us how long you had lived in America, how many degrees you had earned there, and how rich you had become. Master Moe is very proud of you. He also said you were teaching in a university there. You must be extremely successful because you're teaching Americans!"

Tianlei blushes, feeling awkward at such complimentary remarks. The pedicab drivers all glance at him with expressions of admiration. The vendor, quickly wiping the table, asks Tianlei to sit down, and places a sesame seed cake and a pair of deep-fried dough twists in front of him. Seeing that the other people are all standing as they eat, Tianlei follows suit so that he will not look special and, in their rough manner, takes a big bite of the food, muttering:

"You folks really work hard! It's so late and you're still doing business?"

A pedicab driver, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, spits on the ground, and seeing Tianlei wince at his action, tramples the spittle into the dirt, and says, "What choice do I have? I've got six mouths to feed. How many kids



do you have?"

"Young Master Moe isn't married yet," the vendor cuts in. "That's why he came back. I've seen his girl. She's beautiful! After they get married, both of them are going to America. Isn't that so, Young Master?"

"Well, I don't know about that," says Tianlei, wishing his father had not told street vendors about his personal affairs. "Because I've been away for so many years, I came back to visit my family."

"A lot of Chinese living overseas have returned to visit their relatives," says another pedicab driver. "A Mrs. Wu who hired my pedicab has a son that just came back, and he brought her a diamond ring with a diamond as big as an eye. You should've seen that! She said the money her son earned there in just one year could last him a lifetime in Taiwan! I wouldn't mind pedaling my legs off just to send my son to America someday."

Tianlei can't continue eating. He takes out all the coins in his pockets and lays them on the counter, saying, "I hope this will be enough for the food. And thank you, Sir." He leaves as quickly as he can and walks straight toward Xinyin Road, but not down the alley he came from, hoping that the faster pace will make him forget what he has heard.

What was my aim in going abroad to study, he asks himself, or did I not have one and simply went because others had done it? At the time almost everybody complained about not being

able to find a job after graduating, but he, by good chance, managed to find a position at an English-language press right after he finished school. The pay wasn't ideal, but since he lived at home, it was enough for him to get by on and he still had some left to give to his parents. Why, then, did he go abroad in such a hurry? After he left, he maintained occasional contact with some classmates who remained in Taiwan. It is true that they worked hard to earn a living, but their lives were much smoother! Their frustrations were, perhaps, just the opposite of his own, frustrations from not having a chance to study abroad. But his disappointments were deeper, resulting from the discovery, following the achievement of his goals, that the ideal world he had imagined did not exist. Perhaps some of his old classmates envied his return in glory: the Ph.D. in hand, the possibilities that had opened up for him. But who could have thought that the price of such accomplishments was his youth, and that despite having a secure future, he felt empty inside? In addition, he had experienced racial discrimination, hardships associated with studying liberal arts as a foreign student, and above all loneliness that was darker than storm clouds, vaster than a sea, and colder than ice! He could not explain these miseries to people. They would not understand. Of course other Chinese students overseas would have had similar feelings; but for them, an explanation would not be necessary.

Before he realizes it, he has already reached Taiwan

University, where he spent his undergraduate years. Under the street lights, the school seems to have changed a lot. The area beyond the sports ground used to be desolate but is now occupied by high-rise buildings. In the open space that was in front of the men's dormitories, a tall building now stands. He strolls further and discovers, to his surprise, that the wooden shack which once served as a campus church is still there, making him feel as though he had met an old friend. Like an insomniac, he passes rows of classrooms, and through the dark windows he sees desks and chairs. The church reminds him of his freshman year at the school when he frequently rode his bike through a side entrance, whistling loudly. He noticed girls going in and out of dorms but had no courage to stare at any of them. How foolish and content he was during those years, especially compared to the times he spent at Southern Illinois! But those days are gone, gone forever.

The narrow gravel road leads him to the front entrance where he turns and looks at the giant palm trees soaring into the dark sky. He remembers making a special trip to this place before he left Taiwan. Standing before the palm trees he had vowed to be like them, unafraid and distinguished. Now with his head low, he starts his way home, realizing that during the ten years abroad, he not only did not distinguish himself, but had become more cowardly.

One's self is revealed when faced with a critical decision

or an emergency. A coward has no courage to prevent an event from happening, nor does he have the fortitude to get on with his life afterwards. That's Tianlei, a man whose nerve has been irreparably weakened by his years as a foreign student. What had happened between him and Jiali made him realize this.

It was toward evening at the beginning of winter when he saw Jiali outside the library. He biked around the building because he knew Jiali frequently borrowed books. When Jiali came out with a stack of books, he hurried up to her and helped her place them in the basket on her bike.

Tianlei noticed that all the books were by Henry James. "Do you like his writings?" He no longer addressed her as "Mrs. Lu" but didn't dare call her by her first name either. "I don't care for James," he continued, "because he writes sentences that are five or six lines long, and by the time I finish the last line I forget what the first line says."

She laughed, her face tilted up. "I used to have the same feeling," she said. "I also thought he was using too many words as if he wanted to show off his masterful sentence structure. When he describes a woman, he doesn't tell you how her eyes or nose look, but wants you to sense her appearance. I didn't like that either, but now I'm used to it. I think he's got a peculiar style that no other writer has. Well, maybe Edith Wharton's The Reef contains a little Jamesian flavor. I like his novellas, especially The Aspern

Papers. Have you read that?"

"No."

"You might want to read it when you have time. His description of the old lady is so dramatic. I've tried to read his later novels but couldn't finish them. Now I want to read them through. By the way, would you like to come over for supper? Boyuan isn't home." She did not insist, but he did not decline either. So she went home first, and he rode his bike to her neighbor's house to pick up her son. By the time he arrived at her place she had a cup of tea ready for him.

"In all the time I've lived alone I can't remember making tea, except in the morning. My family has sent me lots of tea. I'm going to bring you some next time."

Jiali, helping her son take his jacket off, said, "You've got to have the time to sit back in order to enjoy tea. Even I, a housewife, can hardly find time to sit down and relax, not to mention your schedule. If someone asked me what I busied myself with every day, I wouldn't be able to say. Why don't you and my son play with his electric train while I go cook a good meal?"

Their supper consisted of steamed pork, preserved vegetables with tofu, and a vegetable soup.

"Great! We've got tofu," he commented as he sat down at the table. "I haven't had tofu in years. Where did you buy it?"

"Buy? You can't buy it unless you go to New York, or you can have someone send it to you by air from Taiwan. I made it myself! One thing I've learned in all these years in the States is that if you want something tasty, you've got to make it yourself; otherwise, don't even think about it. When I first came, I had great ambitions and wanted to do something to impress the whole world. What I wanted to do then was to get into the American literary arena. But after I finished school I found out that if I didn't get married soon, I'd probably be an old maid for the rest of my life. So I got married in a hurry, and after that I felt I should have a child so that we wouldn't just sit and stare at each other. So I had a child. After our son came, I devoted my entire energy to him for the first five years and my former ambitions all evaporated. But after he started school my life became empty again, so I wondered what I should do to keep myself occupied. Then I thought of sitting down and writing something because that would be a good way to let out my anxieties. . . . Another thing I tried to do was make food that you can't get here. You know, some ladies in New York fry their own twisted dough sticks!"

While listening to Jiali ramble on, Tianlei started his third bowl of rice, the most he had eaten in several years. Jiali looked at him and spoke as if to a pampered child. "Don't stuff yourself. You might regret it later. Why don't you load the dishwasher for me while I go put my son to bed?"

Each time Tianlei came, whether for a meal or simply a chat, the part he liked best was after Jiali's son had been sent to bed because then they would be alone together. Just to be with her, with or without conversation, made him happy. He wasn't sure if she felt the same way, but he did know that she enjoyed talking with him.

"Oh, a friend of mine in New York sent me a record of old Chinese songs. Would you like to listen to it?" Jiali had returned from upstairs where her son had gone to bed. She poured two cups of tea and placed the record on the stereo. The first song was "The Ten Thousand Li Great Wall," a song which sounded very familiar to Tianlei but whose exact lyrics he could no longer recall. He sat straight as he listened, "The Great Wall is ten thousand li long. Outside the Wall is my dear home town." Each of the words pounded on his heart, bringing back childhood memories. Lowering his head, he cupped his hands over his face in a reflective pose while the other songs continued, the second one "Missing Home," the third "Flute Sound in a Spring Night," and the fourth one "Shepherd Su Wu." This last song took him back to the evenings when he sat next to his mother, she sewing clothes for him under the desk lamp and humming the tune, he doing his homework while listening to the song, ". . . Su Wu, your sheep are far away. How do you get them home in this snow?" Suddenly tears wetted his palms, dripping to the floor from between his fingers.

Jiali came to sit next to him, tapped him on the shoulder, and put a couple of tissues into his hands. He lifted his head and looked at her, and suddenly buried his tear-streaked face in her palms, kissing them with grief and passion. His feelings for her were varied: they were those of a homeless person missing his family; an unhappy child seeking compassion from his siblings; a lonely man desperate for a woman; and, above all, a deep and secret admiration for an understanding female friend. The record came to an end and she drew her hands back. She did not play the other side, but instead went into the bathroom to get a damp towel for him.

After letting his emotions out he felt much more peaceful. He wiped his face with the towel and folded it into a small square. Then he got up and said, "I should be going now. I haven't started on my report yet."

Jiali went to the closet and took out his jacket, and seeing that it wasn't very thick she also handed him a wool scarf that belonged to Boyuan. "It's getting cold out. Put this on too."

He gazed at her, his look not that of a boy towards a married woman, but that of a man eager to explore a woman's heart. "How should I return this?" he asked her.

She did not avoid his gaze, but didn't return the same look either, and merely said, "You can bring it back tomorrow."

But he did not dare visit her again, because he knew if he went once more his emotions would get the upper hand of him.



How would Jiali react then? If she refused him, he would be hurt. If she accepted him, she would be doing harm to her husband and son. He decided against going and, instead, sent the scarf back through the mail. After that night, he had difficulty sleeping, and because he couldn't sleep he rode his bike around Jiali's house, sometimes till nearly dawn.

On Thanksgiving a Chinese couple hosted a party, but Tianlei did not go because he knew Jiali would be there. Snow started falling in early December, yet he continued his nightly rides around Jiali's house, and eventually caught the flu the week before Christmas, a disaster he could never forget. He woke up the first night after school was out sensing tremendous heat. He thought the house was on fire and sat up immediately, his head dizzy. In a state of confusion he pushed on the light by the bed and saw there was no fire. Then he realized the heat was in his own body. He touched his forehead and it was hot--he was indeed sick. He had caught minor colds before but never felt as weak as that day. The worst thing that could happen to a student abroad was to become ill: doctors' bills were rarely in the budget.

Slowly getting up he took two aspirins from the desk drawer, swallowed them with cold water, and went back to bed. He wanted to take his temperature but did not have a thermometer, so he gave up on that idea. Later that night the effect of the aspirin subsided and his temperature rose again. He felt so weak that he couldn't get up to take more

medicine, so he remained in bed dozing fitfully until the sun rose. Since his basement apartment had only one door, which led directly to the backyard, he was in effect totally separated from his landlord. In the morning he realized he should call somebody for help but had no energy to move off the bed. Finally during the afternoon he managed to go upstairs and knock on the door, but no one answered--his landlord must have gone out. Supporting himself on the handrail he hobbled back to his room and took more aspirin, then lay down again. By the time he woke up it was already evening. He knew that his friend Gu would not be in his office at that time of the day, and he had also forgotten his home phone number, so he spent another night hungry and sick. The third day he struggled to his landlord's place and called Guan, another Chinese student, for help. His landlord, seeing his pale face, was terrified, and when Guan and another student came they called an ambulance and rushed him to the hospital.

On Christmas Day Tianlei was still in the hospital. The sheet on his bed was white, the nurses' uniforms were white, and through the window he saw white snow covering the ground. His heart sank. Even though there was a Christmas atmosphere in the hospital, with joyous songs and various-colored gift packages from patients' friends and relatives, Tianlei still felt sad. The patient who shared his room received a warm visit from his entire family, who brought a Christmas tree

along. The patient's wife and two sons, both about ten years old, decorated the tree with twinkling lights and colored balls and placed many presents beneath it; together they talked and laughed and had a happy time. Tianlei wanted to get away from their merrymaking but couldn't. No one came to visit him. Those people Tianlei knew who had families celebrated the holiday at home, and other students had probably gone to their friends' places to avoid being alone. He waited anxiously in bed, hoping that someone--anyone--would come to see him so that the other people in the room would not start feeling sorry for him. He didn't dare entertain the thought of Jiali's coming because he wasn't sure if she knew he was in the hospital. Even if she knew she still might not come, for such a visit would violate family propriety.

Evening arrived and still nobody came. A nurse brought in dinner for the patients--turkey, gravy, biscuits, peas, and large bowls of peppermint ice cream. His roommate began eating in high spirits and Tianlei, not wanting to show his depressed state of mind, picked up the knife and fork but before any food reached his mouth, tears began to roll down his cheeks. He set the silverware on the tray, threw a jacket over his shoulders, and walked into the hallway. A huge Christmas tree stood in a corner, its red and green bulbs lighting up the entire passage. He went into the washroom, where there was no holiday atmosphere, and stood by the window, gazing at the snowdrift outside, pondering his own

uncertain future, feeling that his grief was intolerable. Since no one was around he wept without restraint, and by the time he returned to his room he had calmed down. In the evening his roommate's family came again and Tianlei sat quietly watching them open their presents. They surprised him by giving him a tie and he was extremely grateful.

Tianlei was discharged from the hospital the next day and the doctor asked him to rest at home for two weeks. The same afternoon Jiali came to visit him and she brought him some California oranges and several Chinese novels and magazines. As she entered his small basement room, which had a cold, concrete floor, only half the window above the ground and pipes intertwined below the ceiling, her heart ached. She stared at his pitiable face, pale and bony. Involuntarily she sat down next to him on his small bed, letting his feeble arms draw her head towards his.

Outside the front gate of Taiwan University Tianlei turns and heads home. It is the middle of the night, not a single pedestrian on the streets. Occasionally a bicyclist passes and turns to look at this nightwalker. To avoid such strange looks, he simply hides himself in a bus shelter and sits down on the bench. In all these years he has been afraid to think back to the final episode between himself and Jiali, and today he wants to relive the experience one last time. After that, for Yishan's sake, he will forget all about it.

Tianlei and Jiali met frequently during the months between her visit to him and his receiving his doctorate. She often came to his place to chat or cook a meal for him, occasionally just sitting by him. Jiali had known many Chinese students. Some had grown mature and strong through hardships, some had become like robots, and some had lost hope completely--like Tianlei. If what Tianlei needed from her was strength to fight his loneliness, she would be perfectly willing to give him that. Besides, she was lonely herself, her husband being a workaholic and her child out with his playmates much of the time. Her concern for Tianlei was purely Platonic at first, but as time went on it became something else. Once the relationship was no longer purely Platonic, neither of them could stop what was to follow. She became his mistress and gave herself entirely.

Those months were the happiest time of his life. Things stolen, borrowed, or acquired unexpectedly often bring such happiness. At times he even asked her to marry him. She never gave him a direct answer but asked instead, "Are you absolutely sure that's what you want? If you are, I can ask Boyuan for a divorce."

Each time their conversation reached this stage, he could not make up his mind. Inside, both of them knew he was not totally irresponsible, and would never be. The last thing he wanted to do was to destroy his parents' hopes by marrying a

divorced woman. He did not want to hurt Yishan's feelings either; her youthful hopes deserved a happy future. Besides, Jiali was several years his senior and had a child, yet he did not have the least interest in being a father. He needed Jiali, as a homeless person needs warm clothing in the winter: the need was merely "seasonal." He had never asked Jiali if she could really leave her husband and marry him, because he knew she could. It wasn't that she did not feel anything for her husband or son; she was simply more courageous than he and would, for her own happiness, be willing to sacrifice other things in her life. He recognized her intrepid character the first time he met her. And because Jiali was brave she came to say good-bye to him the day after he had received his Ph.D.

"Congratulations, Dr. Moe, for having gone through the toughest period of a man's life."

He wanted to kiss her but she turned away.

"I have a small gift for you here," she said. He opened the box and found an exquisite silver tie clip with a pearl on it, her initials etched below. She put it on his tie, and he was about to embrace her but she reached for a bottle of wine from her bag. "I've even brought a corkscrew. Come on, let's celebrate. It's also time for me to say good-bye."

His face suddenly turned pale. "Where are you going?"

She laughed, throwing her head back. "Nowhere, but I'm not coming here again."

"Jiali. . . ."

"Now that you've gotten your doctorate and have finished your studies, no matter what you're going to do, whether it's teaching or working somewhere else, you should begin to act like an adult--in the full sense of the word. Becoming an adult, if you don't mind my using an American cliché, means being able to 'stand on your own two feet' and move on to another part of your life, to begin the career you've been preparing for, to start a family and an entirely new life. That should be a life without me since I already have my own."

"But I'm still here, Jiali."

"I know, but I shouldn't see you anymore. For the past several months I've acted like a child who has sneaked out of the nice and comfortable room her parents have arranged for her and played outside with another child, and both of them have had a good time. But now she's got to return home; otherwise, when her parents find out about it she not only will make them unhappy but will also spoil the fun she's had with her friend. So now I should go back where I belong. But if you insist on our seeing each other until you leave, I will go along with that too. However, I do want you to think carefully about that. Look, you received your degree yesterday and that was an extraordinarily happy event. If I leave you now, it's true you may feel a little hurt, but I don't think all your happiness will be taken away."

"I'm going to borrow a car and we can go out this evening. This is my last request to you before we part. Please don't

let me down."

She paused a moment, then said resolutely, "Fine. In that case, let's save the wine for later."

In the evening they went to her favorite restaurant in town and ordered steaks. The waiter brought a bucket of ice to cool their wine. Jiali wore a dark green overcoat which she knew he liked and a suit to match, with a small round collar. The suit was tight at the waist and cuffs. She had applied makeup meticulously, her eye shadow silvery green, her lips red but softened with a champagne frost, the luster of her lips and eyes picking up the green of her clothes, and the green emphasizing the glow of her face. The waiter opened the bottle and poured wine for both, neither of them saying a word as they clinked glasses. Tianlei wasn't used to drinking, but he emptied the glass at one gulp while Jiali sipped the wine. They remained silent until the main course was served. She asked him where he was thinking of going, what his plans were for Yishan, and whether he was going to return to Taiwan for a visit, all her inquiries showing concern yet without intimacy. The waiter filled his glass again. He raised it and touched the glass in Jiali's hand.

"I want to express my gratitude but don't know where to start. I'm extremely grateful for all you've done for me. So, thank you, Jiali. Thank you for all the pleasure you've given me."

She raised her glass, sipped a little, and said, "To use



an American phrase, same here."

"I'm so used to being with you that I truly enjoy talking with you about things that I like or dislike. Every time I read a book or poem, I want to tell you about it. You've become a part of me. Without you in my life, I can't imagine what will be left for me."

"Emptiness. But that will be filled by something else. Don't tell me that won't ever happen. Nothing in the world is constant. Everything changes through time."

Without saying a word he poured more wine for himself. He drained it off and started gazing intensely at her face. She laughed and said, "Eat something too. Don't spoil our celebration. When we're done here we'll go dancing, but I have to be home by midnight."

While they danced she could smell the wine on his breath and on the skin of his forehead and his neck. They moved quietly to the slow rhythm of the band, putting behind them worries of the real world, letting themselves enjoy each other's companionship in the tender, sentimental music. At the start of a fast dance they returned to their table and sat there silently. He took her home just before twelve, and as she moved to leave the car he started crying in her arms. She supported his head with one hand while with the other she combed her fingers through his long hair.

"Remember what I told you this afternoon? Be strong and act like a mature man."

"I can't. I just can't."

"It's not that you can't; you're not trying." She helped him sit up, her hand touching his face, her eyes watching him. "If you will try, I'm sure you can. It's much easier than studying for a Ph.D. Look, each time you want to cry I want you to remember this: a strong man will win women's respect while a weak one can only gain their sympathy."

"Have you been so good to me because you felt sorry for me?"

She did not answer, but looked him straight in the eye. He suddenly recalled that a long time ago he had once asked her if she felt happy being with him. She didn't answer that either. But these were two things he desperately wanted to know. "I have to go in now. Drive carefully. Good-bye."

He rises heavily from the bench in the bus shelter and trudges toward Xinyin Road. He recalls that during his stop in Japan on his way home, he went into a jewelry store to look for a cultured pearl for Yishan. On red velvet under a clear glass top lay many shining cultured pearls. He asked a salesperson to pick the best one for him and held it in his palm. An old American lady standing next to him said with a smile, "Be careful with it! Once you lose that pearl you'll never find another one like it."

Jiali was an exquisite pearl, good not only on the outside but inside as well. But he will never have her again.

Reaching Xinyin Road he walks along a narrow sidewalk to avoid being noticed by the street vendors. He takes his shoes off and holds them under his arms before slipping through the front door. In the northeastern corner of the sky the first light becomes visible.

## CHAPTER SIX

Tianlei is suddenly awakened from a sound sleep by voices. He doesn't know what time it is or what has happened. In the living room, a man whose voice he doesn't recognize is speaking to his parents and sister.

He is still lying in bed half awake when the door is suddenly pushed open a little, sunlight pouring into the room. He rolls over and through half-open eyes sees two fingers resting on the edge of the door, a pair of dark, sparkling eyes staring at him.

"Hi, Xiao-rong. Come on in. What are you up to?" Tianlei says, his eyes still not wide open.

The girl, about five years old, opens the door wider, showing her entire face. Eating a deep fried dough twist, she scans the entire room. Since the girl does not respond, Tianlei waves and says, "Why don't you go see your mother and let me sleep a little more?"

"Mom is busy," says the little girl with a clear voice, peering at him through the mosquito net. "She's talking to a policeman."

"What? What's a policeman doing here?"

"A thief stole lots of things from us. Grandma is so mad she's crying."

He sits up in a hurry and, catching himself in the mosquito net, brings the entire fixture down, his face and whole body

covered with gauze. He tries to crawl out through the opening but cannot find it. As he fumbles around, the net becomes even more tangled on his face, and Xiao-rong starts giggling. Her mother, hearing her laugh, rushes into the room.

"Sh, Xiao-rong. Don't disturb your uncle's sleep." But seeing Tianlei's awkward condition, she cannot help laughing herself. When she finally helps him out of the mess he sighs and says, "I haven't used this thing for quite a while. I'm not used to it yet. What's all that noise about?"

"A thief broke in and stole many things. Mom said your video camera, projector, and other things were all taken. Why don't you go and check what else is missing?"

Tianlei is appalled. "What? A thief broke in? How could. . .?" He suddenly stops. When he went out last night he did close the door behind him but did not lock it. Could it be that a thief was watching the house when he left? "Do thefts often occur around here?" he asks Tianmei.

"There have been several, but this is the first time it's happened to us. Oh, Xiao-rong, go ask Ah-cui to wash your hands for you, then finish the milk on the table. Good girl. Are you feeling all right, Tianlei? I'm surprised the uproar in the house didn't wake you."

"I went out later. . . ."

He suddenly realizes he has revealed his going out the night before but cannot take back his words. "I went out to take a walk and came back a little before dawn," he says,

buttoning his shirt.

"Oh, that's why. . . ."

Holding a finger to his lips, Tianlei signals his sister to stop. "What a coincidence!" he says and follows Tianmei to the living room, where his parents are talking with a police officer. Seeing Tianlei, his father promptly introduces him. "Oh, here's my son, and this is Officer Wang. He came to record our losses. Damn! This is so unfortunate--we've lived here for over ten years, and this is the first time our house's been broken into, and most of the things stolen were things my son had brought back from thousands of miles away!"

Officer Wang, to Tianlei's surprise, acts in a rather westernized manner, shaking hands first, then expressing regret about the incident. Tianlei offers him a cigarette and, seeing his own open suitcase by the door, walks over to examine its contents. His two brand-new suits, several shirts, ties, and clips are all gone. Searching further, he discovers that the pearl tie pin from Jiali is also missing, and that makes him feel worse than losing a thousand suits. He stands still and, crestfallen, says to the officer, "While I was abroad, I heard that a lot of progress had gone on here, that people's lives really had improved and that the crime rate had gone down. This seems just the opposite. I can't believe it. It really makes me a little disappointed."

"We're terribly sorry that this has happened," says Officer

Wang. "According to statistics, the crime rate in this area has been very low. It is indeed unfortunate that this incident has left you with a bad impression. We'll try our best to recover the stolen goods. Please give us a list of things that are missing, and we'll do what we can."

Tianlei silently regrets his carelessness the night before. "What are our chances of getting our things back?"

"I can't promise but we'll try our best. The more specific your list is, the more helpful it'll be for us. You know, in recent years Taiwan's population has increased so much that you can't avoid things like this, so the best solution is to always be very careful. You can't expect this place to be just like the United States, where people don't have to lock their doors at night."

Tianlei, still silent, raises his head to look at the policeman. He wonders just how perfect everyone here thinks the United States is. It seems that all people, from intellectuals to pedicab drivers, think that the U.S. is a flawless place--rich and safe, as if no problems ever exist there. How did they get such ideas? Is it really true that people there don't even lock their doors at night? He finds it absurd and annoying. Was there ever a day when he picked up a copy of the Mirror and didn't see headlines about robbery, theft, rape, or murder? "I'll write up the list right away, and I hope you'll have good luck solving the case. Some of the things have values other than monetary and can't

be replaced. I thank you for all your assistance."

Taking the list, the officer leaves while Tianlei's mother cries at his side.

"Mom, are you all right? Don't be so upset. They aren't things that cost a whole lot."

"You worked so hard to get those things and you went through all that trouble bringing them back, and now they're gone!"

"It's not that big a deal, Mom. When I go back I can save enough money in a few months to buy all those things again."

"But you worked so hard for them, and the thief took them away so easily. It makes my heart ache."

"Easily?" says Tianmei, who is trying to reduce her mother's anger. "I don't know about that. I think it does take some effort to push that door open."

"I give up on you, Tianmei. Here I am feeling so sad yet you're making sarcastic comments!"

"Mom," Tianlei cuts in. "Haven't you heard it said, 'Give up your material belongings and you'll be saved'? As long as all of us are still all right, that's what really matters. Things aren't part of us. Once they're gone, it's not worth it to grieve over them." To comfort his mother, he adds, "I earn hundreds of dollars a month. Those things are nothing to me. Mom, I'm hungry now. Do you have anything I can eat?"

She instantly stops crying, stands up and says, "I'm going to make chicken noodles for you."



"Noodles for breakfast?" he says to his mother with a surprised look. The moment he hears the word noodles, an image of the big pot of the noodles he would make in Chicago flashes before his eyes: it's got chicken broth in it, mixed with raw vegetables or pork from a few days earlier, and perhaps also some spaghetti--a big mess. After the first meal he would store the entire pot in the refrigerator, then heat up the whole thing the second day and eat right out of the pot in front of the stove, holding a piece of paper under his chin to keep the heat from his face. The third day, and perhaps for the rest of the week, he would eat more of the leftovers. In the end, the noodles were indistinguishable from the other ingredients. He sometimes would rather go hungry than eat the stuff. Even though he wants to have breakfast now, he loses his appetite when he hears it's going to be noodles.

"Why? Don't you like noodles? They taste quite good. Why don't you try some? If you don't care for them I'll make you some sweet eggs."

He sits in the dining room waiting for breakfast. A short while later as his mother brings the food to the table, a sharp, delicious smell reaches him: green onions, chicken slivers with mushrooms cover the top. He tastes a little and finds it appetizing, then gulps down some more, saying to his mother and Tianmei, "Wow, this is really good. Why don't you have some, too?"

"We've already had breakfast," says Tianmei. "We don't

sleep in like you do. Are you like this when you're in the States?"

"I sleep in on weekends since I have nowhere to go."

"Nowhere to go?" His mother seems puzzled. "The States are such a fascinating world and you don't have places to go?"

He frowns, the food no longer seeming so tasty. He has indeed been to many places in the United States, but going out alone isn't a great deal of fun; in fact, it is embarrassing. He didn't ask others to go places with him because he didn't know if they had the time; furthermore, going out with people who had different interests and tastes wouldn't be enjoyable anyway, so he simply stayed home. Besides, students had little extra money. After he started working, his spirits were still low. Instead of going out to watch others have fun he stayed home to avoid the awkwardness. But how can he tell anyone about such things, especially his own family? If he did, it would be like sticking a pin into a big colorful balloon cherished by his family. Let them keep the balloon. Even though it is empty inside it looks nice on the outside; once it explodes, all that'll be left is a piece of wrinkled rubber. "Mom, nobody has invited us out today, have they? I didn't sleep too well last night, and I want to stay home and rest."

His father, who has been sitting in the living room smoking the cigars Tianlei brought for him, walks over to the dining room door and says, "Mr. Liu just called and invited you to

the Malaya Restaurant. His son will finish his military training this year and wants you to help him get a scholarship."

"Get a scholarship? I'm not a university president!"

"But you teach in an American university. You should be able to do something. Mr. Liu said his son's grades in high school aren't the best but. . . ."

"Then what's he going to college for?" Tianmei cuts in.

"Tianmei, you are a mother now. Why are you still acting so childish?" says her father, who is beginning to get a little upset. Turning to Tianlei, he asks, "Mr. Liu would like you to write a letter to the physics department at your school. You can do that, can't you?"

"Dad, I don't think that's how it works in American universities. Mr. Liu's son wants to study physics but I'm not a physics professor. How can I recommend him? I applied for scholarships on my own. Remember? If his grades aren't very good, he should try to secure admission first, and when he gets over there he should be able to find a way to support himself. Anybody can."

"But Mr. Liu has helped us many times. How can we let him down on something that's so important to him? Why don't you write a letter anyway? If it doesn't help, that's not your fault."

"It's not that I don't want to help, Dad. My letter won't do anything; it'll simply be laughed at. If that's why Mr.

Liu wants to invite me to dinner, I definitely can't go because I won't be able to help his son."

His father's expression begins to sink. "Tianlei, you've only been back for a few days. I really don't want to lecture you, but I think you've changed a lot in the past ten years--you don't care for other people's feelings anymore. I've noticed that in the past several days. When people invite you you seem so indifferent. You have to realize that they do so out of the kindness of their hearts. You've returned home in glory and others want to join us to celebrate. They're not asking favors from you; your success isn't going to benefit them personally. How can you take their good will for granted? Your doing so may cause your parents to lose face! The last thing a person wants is to be arrogant. Remember the old saying, 'Modesty is the road to success, arrogance destruction.' Haughtiness is an extremely bad quality. No matter how successful you are, you should always behave humbly; that way, people will respect you more. Those who have a high opinion of themselves will fall sooner or later. As to Mr. Liu's request, you may think it's inappropriate, but, for my sake, why couldn't you at least give it a try? It wouldn't cost you anything, would it? But you said 'no' and called it a joke! The reason he invited you is because he thinks highly of you, not because he wants you to put in a word for his son. During these ten years you've not only lost human feeling, but your perception of things has also

been blurred. I'm truly disappointed." He walks away mumbling the last few words, paying no attention to the expression on his wife's face.

During this lecture Tianlei has stopped eating. He now plays with the pair of chopsticks in his hand, crossing them, taking them apart, placing them parallel to one another, then laying them perpendicular to each other. He can imagine the awkward looks on his mother's and sister's faces right now, so he keeps his head down, repeating the chopstick designs. After a long pause his mother begins: "Your father has been nervous lately so he loses his temper quite often, especially after the theft this morning. He's just feeling low. . . ." She sighs and adds, "What a pity! We should all be happy now, but. . . . You know your father--he can't keep his emotions inside, so don't take him too seriously. About the dinner invitation, if you don't want to go, I can call Mr. Liu and say you've had too much greasy food in the past few days and your stomach is upset. He will understand. Why don't you go back to your room and lie down for a while?"

His mother's tactful words make him want to cry in her arms. She feels sorry for the reprimand her son has had to suffer but is in no position to criticize her husband. Actually Tianlei isn't feeling sad because his father has reproached him; he wishes his father could understand his predicament. "Face" is what the Chinese care about the most. They dread losing face. But Tianlei, who has spent ten years

in America and experienced almost every aspect of American life, knows that "face" doesn't play a vital role there. In that country, if a person possesses the qualifications required for a position, he is likely to get it; otherwise, connections won't help. What's "face" to Americans? It's a term that they use to laugh at the way Oriental people do business; it simply does not work there. Walking over to his mother, he touches her on the shoulder and returns to his room, lying on the bed with his eyes wide open.

The phone rings in the living room. He wonders if it is Yishan. Did he really come back for Yishan? He is not sure, for he has been home over a week but has not made an effort to spend any time with her alone. He doesn't miss her even though he thinks of her quite often; not being with her doesn't make him miserable. Turning over he looks at the ceiling, lost in thought again. Could it be that the feelings expressed in their letters never really existed? Or had reality shattered his fantasy? Or is there something intrinsically wrong with him, causing him not to be interested in her? He recalls a conversation with Jiali during which they discussed his relationship with Yishan:

"Her father and mine are long-time acquaintances. My dad wants me to go with her, probably because he knows I haven't found a suitable girl. Maybe he's a little worried and feels he has to help out. That I can understand, but what puzzles me is why Yishan would agree to write to me. For a girl like

her there is no problem in having a boyfriend in Taiwan."

"How long have you been writing to each other?" Jiali asked.

"For almost a year."

"If the two of you are already going together, I would say it's better not to care why she wanted to write to you because that's not important. Besides, if you really haven't had a chance to meet the girl of your dreams, this might be a way to do it. Boyuan has a friend in Pittsburgh who didn't have a girlfriend for five or six years after he received his Ph.D. so his parents chose a girl in Taiwan for him. They started writing and after exchanging a couple of letters he went back and married her, and she returned to the States with him. On our way here this year we stopped by Pittsburgh to see them. She's a nice girl and takes good care of the house. They have a child, too."

"Are they close emotionally?"

She sighed and said, "Well, I am not sure if there is a direct connection between emotions and marriage. Sometimes a couple may be emotionally close, but that doesn't necessarily mean their marriage will work out. On the other hand, two people can get married without intimate bonds in feelings, but later they may get along just fine. I'm not attempting to discourage you, but I don't think you should expect too much out of a marriage; besides, a happy marriage depends on more than just feeling close. I had a good friend

in high school whose boyfriend was really cute. That boy had everything a girl wants. They were in love all the way through high school and college and got married here in the States after they were done with school. After they were married she somehow discovered that he was not the type of husband she had dreamed about. So what could they do? Even though both of them were disappointed--their emotions no longer close--they still stayed married. The reason is that for those Chinese who stay in this country, having a family is more important than anything else, even if there aren't deep emotional ties. I think when your girlfriend gets here and after the two of you get married, it is true you may not experience the kind of love you've fancied as a college student, but at least you'll have a family to go back to, a companion to be with. Then your life won't be quite as lonely. I know how tough it is to be alone."

"So I should get married to avoid loneliness?" Tianlei asked.

"Why not?" replied Jiali. "I used to hate living by myself; all I did every day was go to classes, then go to work, come back to cook a meal, and then study alone. Every day was the same and my life was really boring and stressful. The American girls around me not only had boyfriends, they were friends among themselves, and when they got together even their laughter seemed intimidating to me. So I spent my spare time writing letters home and to friends, telling them all



sorts of lies about this country: how good everything was and how my days were filled with meaningful activities. I never said a word about my loneliness. After I wrote those letters I felt worse. I'm not saying there were no feelings at all between Boyuan and me before we were married; of course we felt for each other, and he's a good husband. But how important were feelings in our relationship? I don't even know myself. So if you want to say I got married to avoid loneliness," she shrugged and let out a deep breath, "I don't see why you can't."

Tianlei sighs and rests his head on the summer sleeping mat. Maybe Jiali was right, he thought. A marriage filled with love is nothing but a college student's dream. And like all the other dreams of those years it has to be left behind once a person gets out of school. Perhaps what he needs now is indeed a practical marriage: a wife who can take good care of him, a friend with whom he can share his life, a woman who belongs only to him.

His mother pushes the door open, a basket hanging from her hand, and asks him: "What do you want to eat for lunch, Tianlei? I'm going out to get some groceries. The theft took up so much time this morning; I hope there's still some good seafood left at the market."

Tianlei's appetite has already been spoiled by the unpleasant incidents this morning, so he says, "Anything is

fine. It's so hot outside. Why don't you ask Ah-cui to run the errand?"

"If I did that, she wouldn't be back till late afternoon. These days you have no idea how hard it is to keep a maid; she can quit whenever she pleases. You know why? Because the Americans that live here pay their maids in U.S. dollars and still say "thanks" and "sorry" to them all the time. The maids' status has been boosted sky-high. The only ones out of luck are folks like us. Do you still remember Mrs. Xia? We had spent so much time training her, and when she finally turned into a good cook, she left us to work for an American lady! She's earning American dollars now."

Tianlei cannot help laughing at his mother's agitation. "How do you know all that?" he asked.

"She told me herself. The lady she works for gives her a day off every week, too. Can you believe that? She's still nice enough to come and see us once in a while and sometimes brings us some of those square slices of meat that Americans eat. They're totally tasteless!"

"That's sandwich meat, Mom. I eat that for lunch every day in the States."

"No wonder! Before you go back I'll have to cook some delicious dishes for you and really fill you up. Oh, that reminds me: you like fried pork with chives. I'm going to get some of that. What else do you like? How about some pig's feet?"

Tianlei shakes his head. "No, Mom. The weather is so hot I don't feel like eating anything. Why don't you sit down and talk with me? We can ask Ah-cui to go and pick up whatever she happens to find. I'll be home for quite a while anyway."

His mother sits down by the desk, noticing Jiali's photo on top. "Who's she?"

Sitting up in a hurry Tianlei grabs the photo from the desk and sets it on his pillow, smiling awkwardly. "A friend of mine," he answers, noticing his mother's intense look. "Is Dad still angry?" He suddenly changes the topic.

His mother's attention is diverted from the photo. She sighs as she begins to explain: "As soon as your father found out about the theft he became furious. I don't think we should blame him because he feels very bad about having said so many good things about Taiwan in our letters and then, right after you came back, you discovered how bad the place really was. He doesn't know how to explain that to you. If you don't mind my being frank with you--I don't think there is much chance we can get our things back. Those thieves are very smart. They'll sell the things at a flea market and then go into the country to hide for some time. No one can find them. Your father knows how hopeless the situation is, and that's why he's so upset."

"Well, actually it's my fault," says Tianlei. "I went out for a walk last night and came back just before dawn. The

thief must have gotten in while I was gone."

Hearing this, his mother is stunned. "No wonder. . . . Where did you go?"

"To the university, to look around."

Standing up, she says to her son, "In that case, you must go back to bed. I thought this time when you came back you had become an adult, but inside you haven't changed a bit. You could've gone to see the school any day; why did you have to go last night? Go to bed now. Your eyes are red. You don't need to get up for lunch. I'm going to make some gruel for you. It'll help you get rid of your internal heat. Go to sleep. I'll tell Xiao-rong not to come and bother you."

With that his mother closes the door behind her. Just as Tianlei is ready to lie down he hears someone knocking on his door.

"Tianlei, may I come in?"

He rolls off the bed and opens the door. Tianmei looks intently at him, then says: "If you aren't sick, Tianlei, I think you should go to the Malaya this evening like Dad wanted you to. Who knows, they might not even bring up that request. If they did, you could just say you'd keep that in mind. You aren't going back right away anyway. Don't make Mom worry over such a small thing. What do you say?"

He pauses, then says, "A friend of mine once said to me: 'a person lives only to do the things he hates to do'."

"The person who said that must be stupid because things

aren't just all the same. There are things which one doesn't hate to do but isn't thrilled to do, either. There is a big difference between those."

He pats her on the shoulder and says, "Well said, Tianmei! See, America isn't the only place where an innocent little girl can be turned into an adult. Taiwan can do that too! You're an example." Smiling, he adds, "All right, I'll go. Would you let Dad know?"

## CHAPTER SEVEN

For the next several days Tianlei continues to spend much of his time going out with his parents to visit friends and relatives. Everywhere they go they are invited to lunch or dinner, and Tianlei is inevitably asked the same questions over and over again. Though he has grown tired of such rituals he cannot escape them. After two weeks he begins to suffer from diarrhea, and his father has to decline further invitations in order to let him rest at home. This break is what Tianlei has been longing for, so on the first day of his rest he lies in bed after everyone else is up, until Ah-cui brings in his breakfast. After three bowls of gruel he sits on the bed, lighting a cigarette and stretching his legs. When Tianmei enters and sees his relaxed manner, she asks him, "You're not pretending to be ill, are you?"

"Of course not. I had to get up three times last night, and I'm very weak now. Why don't you sit down and talk with me for a while? I haven't really had a chance to chat with you yet."

Tianmei goes to the kitchen to ask Ah-cui to take the dishes away, and then returns to Tianlei's room.

"Where's Xiao-rong?" Tianlei asks.

"She went with Mom to shop for groceries."

"She's really become the apple of Mom's eye, hasn't she?" asks Tianlei. "I'm glad that she can come and play with Mom

and Dad once in a while so they won't get too bored."

"But I think Mom and Dad will be happier when you have a child because that child is going to carry on the family name. So what's your plan? Are you going to get married this summer?"

Putting out his cigarette, he scratches his head and stares at the ceiling. "What? Are you kidding? We haven't even had a chance to be alone together. We don't know how we would get along. How can you talk about marriage now? By the way, what do you think of her?"

"Who? Xiao-rong?"

"Get out of here! Seriously, I want you to tell me your frank opinion."

Silent, she plays with a marble on the desk, a little gift Tianlei has brought back. There are various designs in the marble, and when you turn it to different angles, you see different patterns. Turning it slowly, she tries to find a way to answer her brother's question. Before he returned she would always spend time with Yishan whenever she came to Taipei, the two of them going to a movie or a coffee house, or just to Tianmei's home to have a chat. Tianmei is somewhat ambivalent about Yishan: she is rather spoiled but seems to have a kind heart. If Tianlei decided to marry Yishan, it wouldn't be too bad a match. But her brother, she has discovered, has changed dramatically in these years: he has lost the rashness of youth and become extraordinarily cautious

about everything, even withdrawn; yet a girl like Yishan needs a strong, dominant husband, like the Tianlei of ten years ago. On the other hand, what Tianlei needs now is an understanding, caring woman, someone who has experienced setbacks in life, a person who can offer him strength when he needs it. That person is certainly not Yishan. Thus Tianmei does not think the two of them are compatible, but she does not want to say so directly.

"Tianlei," she begins. "It's hard for me to say. Yishan, of course, is a nice girl: she's honest and innocent. You'll find you like her, but you may also find her a bit childish. I guess it all depends on how you feel after you've known each other for a while. Maybe the best thing for you to do is not to rush into this decision. Get to know her a little better before you make up your mind."

"That's what I think, too. Even though we've been writing for so long, I. . . ."

The phone rings in the living room. Ah-cui comes and tells them it is for Tianlei, from Miss Chen.

"Don't forget to ask her to come over," says Tianmei to her brother. "Dad has gone to visit them so she knows you're sick. She wants to come and see you."

Patting her on the shoulder he gets into his slippers and walks out. A moment later he returns and says: "She's coming, but I don't want you to leave. We should all sit and talk."

"I'm not that dumb," says Tianmei. "I know you two want



to be alone. Besides, I need to get some shopping done."

A few moments later Yishan appears at his door. She wears a pink dress with a matching ribbon in her hair, her face soft and delicate. Her appearance seems to drive away the damp heat in the room. Inviting Yishan to sit down, Tianlei asks Ah-cui to bring some sodas. She takes a sip and says: "Your father said you weren't feeling well."

"Oh, it's not a big problem. I've eaten a lot of greasy food lately so my stomach is a little upset."

A silence ensues, the only audible sound in the room coming from the oscillating fan. When she sees the photo of herself on the desk, a million feelings and thoughts rush into her mind, but she does not know how to begin.

She has been writing to Tianlei for four years. At first she thought it was a joke--how could two perfect strangers ever become emotionally involved through the mail? Thus she only wrote a couple of letters the first year, mainly to please her parents and, at the same time, to have something to say to Tianlei's parents when she met them. Each time she visited his house his parents talked incessantly about him and showed her pictures of him. Gradually the stranger in the photos became less and less distant as she started to find out about his hobbies, habits, personality, and the duty and love he felt for his parents. From his parents Yishan also learned that mung bean soup, baked sweet potatoes, and red bean popsicles were among Tianlei's favorite foods; that in

the wintertime he loved to stay in bed and read; that he had occasionally gone to three or four movies on a single weekend; that his favorite card game was bridge; that he didn't like being in a crowd but enjoyed outings to the country with his best friends; that he took pleasure in patronizing blind fortunetellers and that sometimes he was a little overbearing at home.

When Yishan, at her parents' request, agreed to begin writing to Tianlei, she had one condition: that she be allowed to keep seeing Jiajun Yu, a boy whom she had known since her second year in college. Yu was a typical Taipei young man of the '50s: westernized in dress and talk but hollow in the brain, majoring in law, wearing tight pants, playing rugby, dancing to pop music, reading kung-fu novels, learning conversational English, racing his bike, and bragging about almost everything. Nobody knew how he had gotten into college; how he had survived it was a bigger mystery. Many girls thought he was "cute" and some secretly admired him. Thus, he had many girlfriends, but Yishan was what he called his "special girl."

After Yu graduated he was drafted into the military and stationed in Kaohsiung. Yishan, who had wanted to go south to look for a job after she failed the exams for overseas study, had to stay home because her parents objected. Bored, she began to write more frequently to Tianlei. She took the exams again the following year but had no better luck.

Meanwhile, Yu became acquainted with a dance hostess nicknamed Nighthawk. Yu had also taken the overseas study exams and failed, so after completing military training he found a job in Kaohsiung and moved in with his dancer friend. At first Yishan was deeply hurt when she found out about his new relationship. She felt offended not because she had lost him, but because he had abandoned her for a nightclub dancer. Lonely and desperate, she started going out with other men. Mr. and Mrs. Tong, friends of hers, introduced her to some well-to-do bachelors, but she was not interested in any of them. At the time she could have found a secretarial position almost immediately, but her parents did not want her to work at an office job for only one or two thousand yuan per month. Thus she had lots of leisure time and she wrote more to Tianlei. Besides, Tianlei had become her only hope to get to America.

For the next two years she and Tianlei exchanged letters almost every week, and gradually she developed an interest in him. It wasn't that Tianlei was particularly good at writing love letters, but his letters taught her many things. She felt that his words contained deep thoughts and that his mind was worth exploring. From reading his letters repeatedly, she could remember certain passages almost by heart:

"Today is my first day of classes. After school I drove to the south side of Chicago for a look at the place--it is indeed very dirty, with lots of paper blowing in the streets

and into people's faces. . . . They say the crime rate in that area is quite high; people frequently get robbed on the streets, especially at night, sometimes even beaten to death! Once a Chinese student was walking in that part of town at night and suddenly a hand touched his shoulder--he was scared to death! Turning around, he saw a black face. The man, much to his surprise, told him that he shouldn't be walking there alone at night. . . .

"It feels like spring is finally coming; you can see water running in the gutters of Lakeshore Drive. I wish Chicago's spring would last longer because each year right when you are enjoying the spring weather summer arrives. Summer here is long and sometimes even suffocating. The beaches are packed with people all day long, but I never go there even though I used to like to swim when I was in college. (I'm sure my mom has told you that, too, hasn't she?) When I'm here I always feel that I have to hide myself, both my body and my thoughts. By the way, are there many beach concessions in Taiwan now? One that I've always missed is Shui Yuan's Place. . . ."

"Today an old classmate of mine from Pittsburgh came and visited me. It's been a year since I last saw him, but he's changed so much that I could hardly recognize him. His wife (an American) died in a car accident not long ago, and he's got a two-year-old son to take care of. He goes to work during the day, and when he comes home he starts drinking, sometimes finishing two or three six-packs all by himself.

He said he couldn't fall asleep without beer. I told him that he should consider going back to Taiwan with his son, but he said he'd rather suffer here alone than have other people pity him. When I took him out for supper all he did was drink, and as soon as the topic of his wife's death came up he choked up with tears. He was so drunk he needed help leaving the restaurant, but because he had gained so much weight from his drinking, I couldn't even get him on his feet. Several waiters came and got him into the car where he passed out immediately. I felt so bad seeing his condition and didn't know where to take him. . . .

"I've just finished preparing for tomorrow's classes. It's snowing outside, and the snow is mixed with dirt. The winter here is extremely long, and the cold weather makes me all the more homesick. Sometimes I just want to give up all I've accomplished here in these ten years and move back to Taiwan permanently, teaching at a school there in the country, growing a garden, and living a life without competition. . .

"I revisited my old college town today and found quite a few changes. There are more Chinese students now, but I couldn't really talk with them since most of them are new arrivals in the U.S., and their thoughts are still markedly naive. I went back to the basement where I once stayed when I was a student. Someone from India now lives there, and the place no longer gives me the kind of feeling it did before.

Some professors have left the school for other places, and I have no idea where. Professor Wen, one of my favorite teachers, wasn't there anymore, and neither was Boyuan Lu, whom I've mentioned to you before. Actually before Professor Lu and his wife moved away they did let me know, but I couldn't find an opportunity to say good-bye. Their house is still unsold, and no one seems to know their new address. The Chinese here are all the same: they move to a different place every few years, maybe for a new location, a better-paying job, or perhaps a promotion; yet what they can't leave behind is loneliness, a perpetual shadow that clings to them.

. . .

"When I think about returning home after all these years away, I have mixed feelings. On the one hand I feel happy about the prospect of going home, but on the other it brings back past sorrows; so for the most part I am just confused. To a lot of people I may seem rather successful, since I've earned a Ph.D. and secured a college teaching position and, above all, since I have a wonderful girl like you waiting for me at home. But only I know how baffled and scared I am inside. If someone asked me what I was afraid of, I wouldn't be able to say. Maybe I'm afraid that after living alone for so long, I may not be able to handle all the attention I'll be getting at home, or I may not meet your expectations. I am no longer the Tianlei you've been hearing about from my parents; I am now a person fearful of everything and

everybody. I don't even like myself. . . ."

Yishan's parents hinted to her when she first started writing to Tianlei that if they got along fine through correspondence she could go the U.S. and marry him after she finished college, or he could come back and marry her in Taipei and afterwards both of them would go to the U.S. Yishan did not like the idea at first, thinking it was too imprudent, and wanted to play it by ear. After corresponding with Tianlei for several years, she not only became used to hearing about him from his and her own parents but also believed that she had gotten to know the man she had been writing to. As a result, what she had regarded as ridiculous in the beginning no longer seemed so, and she opened herself more and more to him. Knowing that Tianlei was without a companion, she tried to cheer him up with her letters, and he was grateful for her kindheartedness. As their correspondence continued, they came to care for each other more and more. But neither of them ever brought up the question of marriage.

The parents of both families wanted to see Tianlei and Yishan married, and the young couple never openly opposed their parents' wishes. After Yishan graduated from college she tried to obtain a scholarship to attend an American graduate school, but because her grades weren't exceptional, she failed, as had her efforts to pass the overseas studies exams. As her hopes of studying abroad vanished, Yishan became depressed and her parents started to worry for her.

Finally her father raised the idea that since Tianlei had gone to America for ten years, it was time for him to return home for a visit. After Tianlei made the decision to come back, Yishan's parents suggested that she return to the U.S. with him as his spouse. If their marriage indeed took place, both families would feel relieved, and Yishan's parents would have the added consolation that their daughter wouldn't have to go through the hardships of studying in a foreign country. Though she never openly expressed her approval of this plan, Yishan did not show the least intention of rejecting it, but only said when pressed by her mother, "Mom, do you have to keep mentioning this to me? You know I can't do anything until after he comes back."

Does Yishan feel disappointed now? Somewhat, for although Tianlei is merely in his early thirties, he gives one the impression that he is older. She used to think that he was just reserved, but when she met him she found out that he was in fact despondent. She hasn't been able to understand why someone like Tianlei, who has earned a doctorate and has a good job, should be so low-spirited in these early stages of his career. She knows about his past relationship with Meili, and even if that episode had hurt him the torment shouldn't have lasted this long. She has known people who had experienced similar disappointments in love, but they eventually got over them and came alive again. Besides, the



Meili affair was long past, and he now has her. It is true she may not be an academic genius but she has good looks, and above all she cares for him! Even though she didn't expect anything to come out of her writing to him at first, as time went on she did become interested in him. Simply for her sake, Tianlei shouldn't be acting like this.

Yishan is not asking Tianlei to smile every hour of the day, but she does want to see him happier. Zhiyuan Tong, who had also spent many years studying in America, didn't even come back with a Ph.D., but he seemed a lot more cheerful, got married soon after his return, and has been teaching happily at a university. Tong enjoys telling people about places he visited in the U.S., the different people he met there and interesting things that happened to him. His stories constantly arouse his listeners' interest and admiration, and he feels proud of himself. Tianlei actually has done better than Tong in every way, and he should be much more contented with himself, but several times when he has been asked at parties to relate his experiences in the United States, he has responded in a dispirited way: "I don't have much to tell you. The Chinese there--no matter if they're studying or working--are all extremely lonely." The way he says it almost makes one think he has lived ten years alone in a desert. Yishan is aware that Tianlei at one time worked at various menial jobs, but all her college classmates who later went to America have done the same--waiting on tables,

picking fruit, washing windows, mowing lawns. . . . To her, such jobs should make a person desire more out of life, and because he has paid his dues he should now enjoy life the best he can! Perhaps she **can make** him more cheerful. Even though she does not know exactly how, she is definitely willing to try.

Picking up the photo stand on the desk, she holds it in her hands. The stand looks rather peculiar: it consists simply of two pieces of transparent plastic, supported by a pair of cylindrical legs. Because it is frameless, the colors of the picture show more vividly, and her smile seems especially sweet.

"What a cute frame," she says. "It looks so much better than the ones made in Taiwan."

Walking behind her chair, Tianlei appears to look at the frame with her, but his eyes fall involuntarily on the face within it. The eyes in the picture seem expectant, their brilliance a sign of the girl's yearning for a glorious future. He lays a hand on the bare part of her shoulder and kisses her hair. "Believe it or not, Yishan, this is the first time we have been alone."

She had not anticipated his touch, and she couldn't believe that it contained no passion. When she dated Jiajun Yu before, he would kiss her in the pedicab on their way home, his behavior bold and a little rough. She would push him away calling him names and he would stare at her with head tilted

and say: "Sweetheart, don't be so afraid! An American girl lets a boy kiss her on their first date. We've gone out five or six times already!" She would glare at him while admitting in her heart that he did have a point. Indeed, the girls she knew of in American movies and novels **were** less shy when it came to kissing or whatever followed, but she disliked Yu's haste. She never brushed him off completely, though. For her, boldness was a manly quality, and that is why she felt puzzled when Tianlei did not proceed further. Maybe it's because we don't know each other well enough yet, she thought. Even though they had written to each other for so many years, letters, after all, cannot replace real human contact.

"Yes, this is indeed the first time," she says. "If you weren't sick, we probably would have had to wait several more days."

"I really couldn't handle two banquets a day anymore, especially when I had to go through the same ceremony each time."

"I thought you couldn't get good Chinese food in America, so you came back to fill yourself up. All my classmates that are over there right now complain about the food."

"Of course I love the food here, but I do not particularly enjoy being invited out to eat and having to please people I disagree with. That really spoils my appetite."

"But the people who invite you are your father's good friends, and they do it simply to show their good will."

"I'm not sure if I got my point across," says Tianlei, who is now sitting on the edge of his bed. "What I meant was I am grateful to those who invite me, but I don't know how to pay them back for their hospitality. Well, since I don't have any appointments today, would you like to take me out to a street restaurant?"

"Is your stomach all right now?"

"I think so, as long as I stay away from greasy food. Actually I just want to go out and walk around a little--not as a scholar returning from overseas, but as someone who has returned to his native place after many years away. I noticed the other day that the small food stands which used to be along the railroad tracks were all gone, and that made me feel sad. It's like leaving something you treasure in a drawer and later you return to find it missing. It is disappointing."

"Well, some of those stands have moved into the China Mall, like Wu's Specialties, True Peking, and Pastry World."

"I hope they're still run by the same people."

"Are there little food stands in the States?"

"Yes, but they all sell the same things: hot dogs and hamburgers."

"Oh, that reminds me: there is a hot-dog stand near the Yuan Shan Zoo. Quite a few people eat there."

"How is it?"

"Well, I don't think it's all that great, but they have lots of customers."

"Of course, because they sell American food," says Tianlei, snickering. "In the few short days that I've been back, I've noticed how much people here admire America. I think they are out of their minds sometimes because whenever they see anything that's associated with the U.S., they automatically think it is better."

"Does that mean you didn't go to the United States because you admired it?"

"Maybe I did. Well, of course I went through the same phase, and that's why I don't think what they now believe is right. I realize this because I've lived in that country for ten years and I know from my own experience that not everything is perfect there."

"I somehow have a feeling that you've had some unpleasant experiences there. Do you want to tell me about them?"

"Actually there isn't much I can tell you. What I consider bad experience is not manual labor; it is something intangible--a feeling. For example, when you are with Americans you do not feel you are one of them. They can get all excited talking about politics, football, boxing, their country, school, or whatever, and you just sit there feeling all that has nothing to do with you; you're a perfect stranger! No matter how much you've achieved or how fluently you speak English, you are still viewed as an outsider. So you turn to your own people. However, the Chinese there are divided into several types: there are the very successful ones

who stay within their own circles, and because they do even better in their careers than most Americans, the average Chinese can't go near them. Another type is the ordinary, family-oriented ones. If they're married, their whole life is centered on their homes. If they're single, they wander around looking for girls, and once they set their eyes on the right ones, they start going after them, trying everything to please them and hoping that someday they'll have their own little families, too. There is still a third type--the unsuccessful ones, who simply waste time together since they don't have homes. Some of them even gamble and drink to forget their problems. If you really want to know which type I belong to, I'd say I'm one of those who is not a complete failure but by no means a success, either. I'm single and alone, and I view myself as an island that's completely covered with sand, each grain representing a part of my loneliness."

"I didn't know you felt so low."

"I'm not feeling low or happy. In the ten years I spent in the U.S., I didn't accomplish anything great, but I didn't fail, either. I don't really like that country, but I do know I will return there. It's not because I can't live comfortably here, but I've lost touch with this place. My roots aren't here anymore."

"I'm sure your parents wouldn't want you to stay here," says Yishan.

"What about you?" he asks, looking at her directly.

"Me? What about me?" she says, staring back with an air of confusion.

Uncertain if she really missed his question or just pretended to, Tianlei tries to explain it in a different way: "If we indeed . . . the way our parents want us to, then will you want me to stay?"

She shakes her head and says resolutely, "No."

"Why not?" he asks her. "When I'm here I can at least work for our countrymen, but when I'm there all I do is work for foreigners."

After a long pause she says, "I feel Taiwan is too small for us to invest our future in. A person has to think of himself before he thinks of his country, right?"

"But what if I'm not interested in big accomplishments? What if I just want to live a peaceful life? Would you still feel the same way about me?"

Yishan's smile begins to fade. "I'm not that snobbish," she says, turning her eyes from him. "But are you saying your purpose for going overseas to study was to come back to Taiwan someday and live a 'peaceful' life?"

He thinks for a while and says, "When you're a student you think about accomplishing great things someday, but after ten years in a foreign country you just want to return home and find a quiet place to live."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean."

"I don't expect you to," he says. "Why don't we drop this subject for now? Maybe we can take a walk and find something to eat."

The heat in the alley is extreme, as though the entire day's sunshine has been gathered there. Outside the alley it is not much better; it feels as if the heat is coming from both above and below. As they walk down the road Tianlei notices the dusty leaves along the gutters, and Yishan, seeing Tianlei wipe his face with a handkerchief and flap the collar of his shirt constantly, cannot help giggling.

"Come on," she says. "Let's go to the ice cream parlor. You must be burning up."

As they enter the store, Tianlei is stunned by the changes. It used to be tiny, its floor always wet, and people frequently came in their wooden clogs, splashing the water on the floor. Even though the floor was muddy, he still went there often because it was close to his home. Once he and his buddy Pingtian Zhang held a popsicle competition there, each with a large tray of popsicles set in front of him. During the contest other customers came to watch, and when each had finished his twentieth, Zhang had to stop while Tianlei shoved the twenty-first one down his already-frozen throat. Finally Zhang conceded he had lost the match. As the onlookers applauded, Tianlei couldn't utter a word, his tongue and mouth completely numb. Afterwards Zhang treated him to a movie, James Mason's Seventh Veil.



Tianlei is somewhat surprised that all these details return to him the moment he walks into the store.

"I used to come here all the time," he tells Yishan, and then asks the waiter to bring two slices of watermelon. "This used to be a small and dirty place, but now it's at least three times larger and about thirty times cleaner. The owner must have made loads of money to fix it up so nicely."

"You have no idea how popular this store is now--everybody in Taiwan knows about it, and they have branches everywhere. There's even another one right here in Taipei. The ice cream they serve is absolutely fantastic, and that's what's made them so rich. The owner's got several homes; one of them is on the Yangming Hills, but the one in the suburb of Taichung has to be the best; it looks just like an American house. He's sent all his sons to America, too!"

She seems to say "America" a lot, and, as Tianlei has concluded from his short stay in Taipei, sending children to that country means several things to most people: it means that the parents have connections, that the children are smart, and that those who go overseas will have boundless prospects. Tianlei wants to say something but holds back. Instead, he asks her, "Since the watermelon is so good, would you like to have another piece? Oh, that reminds me: does the Watermelon King still exist?"

"Yes, it still does, but they sell other things now, too.

By the way, how are American watermelons?"

Oh, that word again! "Well," he says, "since the American moon is rounder than the Chinese one, their watermelons must be sweeter, too!"

He had a smile on his face when he said it, so Yishan wasn't really offended. "Come on, Tianlei, I was just a little curious. Shall we go now?"

They take a pedicab to Hengyang Street, and this is his first time on such a vehicle since he returned. Sitting on the high back seat, aware that people are watching him, Tianlei feels extremely awkward, especially when he looks at the skinny driver pedaling heavily in front of them. When he was at Taiwan University he rode a bike most of the time, and sometimes carried Meili on it, too, the two of them cool and close. If it rained, they would hire a pedicab, and the canopy would keep them from seeing the driver no matter how strenuously the man pedaled. Even if he had seen the driver then, he wouldn't have felt anything for him. But now he feels awfully uncomfortable, wishing he were somewhere else. As soon as they arrive at the entrance to Xin Park, he calls out for the driver to stop.

"Why did you do that?" Yishan asks him, wiping her face with a Wet-nap.

"I think we should get off and walk." He pays the driver, handing the man an additional ten-yuan bill. The driver, his eyes on Tianlei, thanks him and leaves.

"You gave him too much!" Yishan grumbles.

"It's awfully hot today and he pedaled so hard. Did you see all the sweat on his face? He deserved a bonus. Besides, that's only about a quarter when you exchange it; you get a couple of cans of Coke with it."

"No wonder they say people who return from America spend money like water. That's exactly what you did."

Tianlei feels she is misunderstanding him again, so he explains: "I wasn't trying to show I had come back from the U.S.; I just felt I had to give that man a tip. Maybe it's because I've always walked during these years, and I'm no longer used to taking a pedicab. Oh gee, I can hardly recognize this park now!"

The park is no longer the desolate scene of his memory. As he looks around, everything seems to be red: the swings, the merry-go-rounds, the gazebos, and the benches, all reddened by the glaring sunset. Walking around, he feels that the place has lost its natural beauty, like a country girl in a high-fashion dress.

Outside the park Yishan asks, "Do you want to have a look in the bookstore? Your mother told me you used to like to go there."

He looks at her. Yishan's way of speaking somehow reminds him of Meili, his first girlfriend. When he saw Yishan's picture for the first time, he in fact sensed a resemblance between her and Meili but couldn't tell in what way. He now

realizes the similarity. They do not actually look alike, but they belong to the same age group, the period of people's lives when they haven't experienced much trouble. It is also the stage of life when young people tend to behave the same way.

"All right," he says. "I've heard many books are reprinted here in Taiwan. I might just take some back."

He cannot believe how many pirated books there are on the shelves, ranging from all kinds of science subjects to the humanities. A stand near the door displays many American bestsellers, printed on thin paper and in very small type. "Do many people read novels in English?" he asks a clerk.

"These are mostly for Americans who live here. Some Chinese buy them, too."

He goes over to the domestic section to get a glimpse of the books there. The covers of many of the novels appear overly gaudy and distasteful to him, most of the titles vulgar. None of the authors' names seems familiar to him--he hasn't read any Taiwanese novels in quite a few years. When he found time to read he read, of course, books published in English. Finally, picking up two books from the stand by the door, Hawaii by Michener and a collection of O'Hara's short stories, he hands them to a cashier.

The sun has settled, leaving its warmth behind. As they stroll along Hengyang Street Tianlei's shirt is half-soaked again.

"Maybe we should find a cool spot to sit for a while," he says.

"Sure, we can go to the ice cream parlor by the New World Theater and have some sweet-and-sour plum juice. When it cools down a little, we'll go find something to eat. How's that?"

He almost wants to reply with an English expression, "Whatever you want. I'm at your service," but on second thought decides that wouldn't be very proper. So he says, "Anything will be fine. I'll let you decide."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

After their sweet-and-sour plum juice Tianlei and Yishan walk along the street, heading towards the movie section of the town. The sky is growing dark; the humid air smells of sweat. Pop music blares from shops along the roadside, intermingled with the growl of motors, the whir of ice grinders, pedicab bells, and people's talk. As they walk along in the street, Tianlei keeps veering left and right to avoid traffic, and when Yishan steers him to the sidewalk, he constantly dodges oncoming pedestrians. Each time he hears a horn, he looks disturbed. Seeing his nervousness, Yishan cannot help chuckling.

"Why are you so tense?" she asks him.

"I'm not quite used to so much honking or walking in such a big crowd." Seeing the puzzled look on Yishan's face, he adds, "There is lots of traffic on the streets in all cities in the U.S., too, but people almost never honk their horns--unless they want to say 'hi' to somebody on the street or under very special circumstances, warning another car at night that its lights are not on or its trunk is open. You see lots of pedestrians in big cities like New York and Chicago, too, especially during rush hours, but they walk to the right. In a small towns like Berkeley, where I used to go to college, you hardly ever see anyone walking on the streets. . . . It's so crowded here. Is it always like this day and night?"

"There are more people out in the evenings, especially when the weather is hot. People like to stroll along the streets at this time of the day because it's cooler and they can see other people; it's the most economical way to spend an evening, too."

"In American cities--no matter how big or small--you just hardly see anyone on the street at night, unless it's on evenings when stores are open longer--till nine or ten o'clock. Many people go out on weekends, but they go to parks and places like that. On the streets all you see are cars."

"No wonder they say America is the most mechanical society."

Tianlei does not like the logic of her conclusion but before he can say anything Yishan points to a restaurant and says, "How about going in there for some baozi? Their food is really good."

"Baozi--that's terrific! I've missed them all these years! When I was a student here, I used to go near Xin Park after movies at night to find something to eat. I always did that after I received my financial aid check. When I was low on cash, I just ate across the street from the school because it was cheaper there. It's hard to find genuine Chinese food in the United States. Once when I was in New York for a conference I went out with some Americans to eat baozi. I had two plates myself, but they weren't so impressed with them."

"Really? Why?"

A waiter approaches their table. Tianlei orders two plates of baozi and two bowls of vegetable noodles; then he continues, "Americans are weird; they eat all kinds of strange things, like raw vegetables in slices, cold meats, shredded cheese--things like that. They actually eat barbecued ribs with pineapple on top! I can't believe they like the stuff they eat. Oh, I should tell you, they're also crazy about egg rolls and deep-fried shrimp. Those are all they care for, and they never tire of them."

"Do you dislike Americans?"

He sighs, looking at her. Young people are lovely; youth itself is lovely. But innocence--a part of youth's lovely character--frequently leads them to asking naive questions. How can his feelings about Americans be summed up in a word or two? "No," he says. "Why wouldn't I like Americans? After all, they're the ones who clothed and fed me."

Yishan, uncertain whether Tianlei's words are bitter, ironic, or something else, stares at him.

A plateful of steaming baozi arrives at their table, and Tianlei's face lights up. He puts a few on Yishan's plate and munches at the rest, quickly finishing seven or eight of them. Meanwhile Yishan, with one end of a chopstick pressed against her chin, watches him in a daze. After he devours the entire plateful by himself he points to Yishan's plate, signaling her to try some, too. She picks all the baozi from



her plate and puts them on his, then starts eating the noodles. Tianlei isn't in a mood to stand on ceremony, so he eats those also, then asks the waiter to bring the second plate. Yishan is amused by his hunger and says, " I had no idea you had such a good appetite. You didn't eat this much when others invited you."

"That's because I didn't feel comfortable, and when I don't, I can't eat. I feel great today because I'm in a nice little restaurant eating the things I like the most, and also I am with you. All this makes me feel that I'm really home and that the trip was very worthwhile."

Yishan remains silent. The chandelier in the center of the room casts its light upon her blushing face, which, set off by her soft red shirt, makes her look especially pleasant. Aware that Tianlei is watching her, she feels tense and awkward, yet exhilarated. She bends over her tea cup until Tianlei reaches out his hand for hers.

"It's so good to be with you," he says.

"Me, too. Just before you came back I felt really nervous; I couldn't eat or sleep. I could hardly believe that you were really coming back, or the fact that we had been writing for so many years. I was afraid you would treat me like a stranger."

"Well, we are old acquaintances and strangers, too. Before I met you in person I felt I knew so much about you, but after we met, I realized that wasn't the case. You seemed a lot

more mature in your letters."

"I have a feeling you don't like me the way I am."

Tianlei wants to laugh but restrains himself. Patting the back of her hand, he says, "How can that be? I just haven't got to know you well enough yet. Well, if we're done here, where else would you like to take me?"

"There's a coffee house near the train station that's just opened recently. It's a nice place, with good music, too. You want to go there or to a movie?"

"I don't feel like watching a movie," says Tianlei. "I remember there was a cafe near the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. It was called . . . yes, its name was Chaofeng. Why don't we go there? I used to like that place."

Yishan thinks for a moment and says, "I don't remember a place with that name near the Sun Yat-sen Memorial. Well, we can go and find out."

The cafe is no longer there. It has been replaced by a bar whose red neon sign is visible from across the street. From the street corner, he looks at the building while memories of the countless Saturday evenings and Sunday afternoons he once spent there with Meili return to his mind: the table next to the window, the worn yet comfortable seats, the bonsai plants in the room, the cool lemonade they drank, and of course Meili, his love. Sometimes he selected his own music on the juke box, and each time it was Tchaikovsky's Pathetique. As he sat across the table from Meili, he

occasionally touched her with his knees. There were also days when he went there to play bridge with Tianping Zhang and his other friends, or to chat with Mr. Shangfeng Chiu, his professor. Those carefree days! At the time, he didn't realize how fortunate he was; but now when he does, he knows he will never see those days again. Taking Yishan's hand, he says, "The cafe is gone! It never occurred to me that the place could disappear someday."

"I've never even heard of such a place! The cafes that I've always gone to are Tianyuan, Qinglong, and Kaili."

"It seems we belong to two different generations."

"Come on, Tianlei, you're not that old," says Yishan, her lips protruding, lovely and innocent.

"I wasn't talking about age. It's something else."

"I can't understand why you always talk like this. You sound like you've gone through the mill. Actually you should be more cheerful than most people since you've got everything. I don't think any of your old classmates has done nearly as well."

"Well, that has to depend on a person's sense of values. Speaking of classmates, I plan to see Tianping Zhang in a couple of days. I once wrote and told him that I was coming back, but I didn't give him the exact date so he wouldn't come to meet me at the airport. I also want to see Mr. Chiu, the teacher I mentioned to you in my letters. I called him the second day after I came home but couldn't reach him. I'll

take you to visit him one of these days. He's a professor I have high respect for."

"Okay." Yishan doesn't sound very excited. "Oh, there it is--the new coffee house."

The moment they enter the door they feel the air-conditioning. The whole place is dark, the only sources of light the single weak lantern on each table. A flower bed occupies the center of the room, its small white flowers almost making one think the heart-rending female singer's voice comes from there. Yishan takes Tianlei to the second floor where the room arrangements are the same but the lights are even dimmer. Sitting down at a table, Yishan orders papaya and Tianlei asks for some coffee with no sugar or milk. Half the tables are occupied. In the dark Tianlei vaguely makes out two figures on each seat, some looking like one. A couple sits in the corner, but he can see only a shoulder. He cannot remember if he saw such scenes when he went out with Meili. He remembers indulging himself--in a garden and once on the square across the street from his school when nobody was watching--but he doesn't recall acting so boldly among other people. No, that would have been impossible. Meili is a conservative girl; she wouldn't let him. He wasn't that aggressive, either. Not then, or now.

"Did you often go to coffee houses in the States?"

"There aren't coffee houses there--not ones like this anyway. If you go to a cafe, you drink coffee. There are

lots of bars where people go and drink. Single guys go there to look for women, and women for men. There are also nightclubs where besides drinking, listening to music, and telling jokes, you can watch a stripper dance. They've got all kinds of places like that, but I don't think they have cafes where people go for things other than drinking coffee."

"Then. . . ?"

"Where do lovers go? They use their car. That's why they don't need coffee places like this. Such places wouldn't make money there anyway. Americans like to do that kind of thing in the car. When I was an undergraduate I lived in a basement apartment, and there was a parking lot right next to it. On weekends when boys took their girlfriends back to their dorms or sororities, they would park in that parking lot and turn all their lights off. Some Chinese students came to my place to watch, and one of them, a silly guy, always made remarks about every action he saw, and that made us laugh a lot. Once those guys almost caused a fight." Scanning the corner once more, he says, "I can't believe you can see all this live action for just ten yuan."

Yishan turns to get a glimpse too, then lowers her head and starts eating her papaya.

"I'm just absolutely amazed at how fast the Chinese become westernized in certain things," says Tianlei.

"I'm not sure if there is a connection between this and being westernized. Do you really think people need to learn

how to act when they're in love? Since we don't have cars, we just have to find other places."

Noticing that she is becoming serious, he changes the topic. "Do you come here often?"

"Sometimes," she answers casually.

He is tempted to ask her whom she has been coming here with but does not know how to phrase it. "What do you usually do for entertainment? You seldom mentioned that in your letters."

"Oh, nothing really special. I go out for coffee and to dance, and when the weather is nice, I go on outings with friends. There are lots of interesting places you can go, like the Southern Palace, Clear Pool, Wulai, the Yangming Hills, or Yeliu. They're all lots of fun. If you like, I can take you to some of them. You must have been to a lot of places in the United States, I suppose?"

"Yes, quite a few, but all the places I've been to seemed pretty much the same. I haven't gone to the South so I don't know about that part; but I have spent some time on the West Coast, in the East, the North, and the Midwest. I don't think those places are so very different from one another. In every town you see gas stations, hot-dog and hamburger places, ice-cream stores, car dealerships--they're all almost identical. In big cities like New York and Chicago they have skyscrapers, subways, and elevated trains, but other than that they're about the same as most other towns. Of course the old section

of Chicago and Greenwich Village in New York are special, but they're gradually becoming commercialized. There are many historic sites in that country, but most of them are only about a hundred years old, so they aren't really 'historic' in the eyes of a Chinese. They have quite a few scenic spots, but again the commercialization destroys their natural beauty, so they can't compare with Chinese landscape."

Crumpling the empty cigarette pack Tianlei has thrown onto the table, she says, "Every time Zhiyuan Tong talks about the United States he mentions good things, like how convenient the transportation systems are, how much fun the amusement parks are, and how hospitable the Americans are; everything they use is electrical, and whatever you want--food or clothes--you can find there. It sounds like heaven to me. But his description is so different from yours. You seem to say that that country isn't all that great. Of course their food may not be quite as good as ours, but what you say and what he says are not alike at all. The two of you seem to have been in different countries. I don't know whose version to believe."

"Let me ask you this," says Tianlei. "If the United States were indeed like what I said, would you still want to go?"

She pauses, then says, "Yes, I still would."

"But why?"

"Because of you." She lowers her face.

Not expecting such an answer, Tianlei is stunned. He

finishes the rest of his coffee and takes out another pack of cigarettes, lights one, and says, "Suppose I decided not to return to the United States, would you still want to go over there? Or would you want to stay here with me?"

Astonished, for she did not expect such a question, she stares at him with a confused expression, then says, "I certainly don't think you'll decide not to go back, because you already have a good job there, and your parents surely won't want you to stay here. Besides, you said yourself that you didn't feel you belonged here."

"But when I'm here, I'm at least among my own people. I don't want to use such high-sounding words as serving my native country heart and soul and so on; I admit that I may be thinking only about myself. Even with the various limitations here, I can still live pretty comfortably, eat the things I want, and since my parents are getting old, I should try to spend more time with them. As far as my career over there is concerned, yes, I do have one, but it's not so important as to hurt anyone if I left. I wouldn't feel too bad about giving it up, either."

"You say that, but you don't really mean it, do you?"

"You haven't answered my question yet," he says.

"Of course I would love to go to the United States with you, but if you really decided to stay, then I would have no way to go over there by myself."

He smiles as he puts out his cigarette. Taking her hand



from the table, he squeezes it and says, "You would have no way to go or you wouldn't want to go? Those are two different things."

She smiles, saying with a charming yet unyielding tone, "I'm not good at playing word games, but no matter what you say, you are going back."

Having found out what she thinks, he no longer pursues the topic. Despite the fact that they have been writing to each other for nearly two years, he knows very little about her habits and what she likes. Her familiarity with American jazz, singers and movie stars surprises him. She knows not only the performers' names but also their private lives--how many marriages they have been through and whom they are dating now. . . . He remembers going to movies too when he was in college, but he never learned much about the actors themselves. Yishan's thoughts now turn to Hollywood; she wants to know what the place is like. He can only say that it is a small town--perhaps not much different from any other small town--and that it may even be crowded and dirty. When he stayed in Los Angeles one summer, he tells her, he did not see even a single movie star in person.

"One of my classmates has a brother who works on a U.S. military base here. When his boss returned to the United States for a vacation, he took us to his boss's place. You wouldn't believe how beautiful the living room in that house was--all the furniture had been shipped from America, and on

the wall was a picture of that American shaking hands with Frank Sinatra in front of the Chinese Theater in Hollywood! I was told that a lot of actors' and actresses' fingerprints, footprints, and signatures are impressed in the cement of the theater's entranceway. Is that really true?"

Tianlei shows no interest in the topic. Looking at his watch, he says, "It's eleven already. Do you think you should go home now? I'd like to take the bus with you."

At the bus stop, some weary-looking people are waiting. The temperature has cooled down, but the air is still humid. In the distance, a train has just pulled into the station, and a crowd of pedicab drivers swarms up to the people emerging from the train. Wealthy people jump into waiting taxis; the less wealthy dicker with the drivers before getting on the pedicabs; and the poorest hobble towards the bus stop carrying their baggage, their faces drawn with fatigue. The bus which Tianlei and Yishan have gotten on is crowded, and next to their seat stands a hunchbacked old lady who has a wicker basket in one hand and a bundle wrapped in colored cloth on her back. Tianlei stands up, pointing out the empty seat to her. She shakes her head, her shrunken arm gripping the supporting bar above her. Tianlei is about to ask her again to be seated when Yishan pulls him back to his seat, whispering in his ear, "This is not America!"

"Who said Americans offered seats to old people and children? I just thought it must be hard for a person her

age to stand while carrying so many things."

As Tianlei is talking, the bus suddenly stops; the old lady crashes forward, her baskets falling to the floor, the bundle hitting the driver. Turning around, the driver glowers at her. Tianlei stands and helps the lady to his seat, then picks up her baggage and places it on her lap. The woman smiles and nods her thanks, then closes her eyes to rest. Out the bus window, Tianlei watches pedestrians under streetlights and people eating in restaurants that remain open. It is already past midnight, yet so many people are still out on the streets. He remembers the countless late nights in the U.S. when he rode his bike from school to his apartment. Even though the streets were at least twice as wide as the one he is on now, he still saw not a single soul, nothing except the long dark shadow that accompanied him. His drowsiness dispelled by the gentle breeze, he often did not feel like returning to his basement apartment immediately. At the end of Maple Road he turned on Elm, where the girls' dormitories were located. When school was in session, he could see scenes which one normally saw only in the movies. At first Chinese students deliberately avoided that street, but after a while they sought it out and eventually became used to the display of affection between the girls and their boyfriends. In the summer when the students had all gone home, the entire area was quiet, except for the sound of birds. Next to Elm was Nora Street, where he went most frequently during his last

year of graduate school; it was also the street he feared the most. Each time he passed by the Lus' house, a red brick building, he got off his bike and stood looking at it. The light in Professor Lu's study upstairs was always on, and in the living room downstairs he knew Jiali--he had learned this from her--would be sitting in a corner reading or listening to music, passing the time which she otherwise would have spent tossing and turning in bed. Several times he really felt the urge to approach the house and knock at her window, not because he wanted to say anything to her, but because he wanted to make certain that she was really there. There was merely a brick wall between them, but he lacked the courage to go inside and let her know how much he cared for her. Thinking was all he dared.

When the bus stops at the East Gate, Yishan taps him, and he follows her off the bus.

"What were you thinking?" Yishan asks him, her head tilted to one side.

"Oh, not much of anything, just a couple of little things from before. Would you like to go home now or come to my place for a while?"

"Either way would be fine. My mom knows I'm with you anyway."

Looking at his watch Tianlei says, "Maybe it's better if you went home now. It's so late your mother might think I'm used to the night life in America."

"In fact that's not what she thinks. Actually she thinks you're a bit too mature for somebody in his early thirties. You are a lot different from Zhiyuan Tong."

Tianlei does not want to defend himself but simply says, "Maybe it's because I'm not quite used to everything yet; sometimes I just don't know how to act in certain situations. As I spend more time here, I'm sure I'll relax. Come on, let's get a pedicab to your house."

They get on a pedicab and the driver pedals rapidly. Only at this hour can they begin to enjoy the cool and tranquility of the summer night.

Yishan's home is in the fourth section of Benevolence Boulevard. Because it is early morning, no one else is on the street. Leaning on Yishan and caressed by the night breeze, Tianlei gradually loses the helpless feeling brought by earlier memories. As he puts his arm around Yishan's shoulder, she quickly slips her arm around him. He kisses her hair, still fragrant after their long day together. Raising her head suddenly, she gazes at him, her eyes full of expectation and trust. He kisses her again, this time on the lips. Instantly he senses how desperately she needs him. Does she really want him, he suddenly wonders, or is it his status as a Ph.D. from America? He closes his eyes, pushing the question out of his mind.

At the entrance to her house she asks him, "Are you coming to get me tomorrow?"

"My sister might be leaving soon, so I think I'll stay home with her. I haven't really had a chance to sit down and talk with her yet."

"Then I'll see you the day after tomorrow?"

"Well, I'm thinking about visiting Professor Chiu then."

In the dark, she says nothing further.

"We'll have lots of time together, so what's one or two days?" says Tianlei.

"But you know my mom and dad might start to get worried."

"I don't see why they should."

"Because they think we should spend every waking minute together so that we can really get to know each other."

"That's what I want too, but I'm going to be here for several months yet. I've asked for an entire semester off from the school, so I can stay until winter."

"Oh, I thought you were going to stay only till the end of the summer."

"I know I've been saying that, but actually I **can** stay longer. That way we can spend more time together. You know, for us, being together in Taiwan is totally different from being together in the United States. You don't need to let your parents know this right away, but we might think about taking a trip some time to the south-central part or Hualian. I'd like very much to get reacquainted with Taiwan. If you could go with me, that would be perfect."

"Just you and me?"

Stroking her hair, Tianlei smiles. "I don't see why not. Maybe we'll ask Tianmei to come along, too. That we can decide later. Maybe you should go in now. I'll call you tomorrow. Good night."

## CHAPTER NINE

Tianmei sits alone in the living room reading a film magazine. A small oscillating fan nearby provides some relief from the dreadful summer heat. On the cover of her magazine is a Taiwanese movie star, whose experience in posing is evident from the photograph. This kind of reading material has been her favorite since her high school days, and although she has changed a lot since then, this hobby has remained with her.

"Did you have fun?" she says to her brother as she puts down her magazine.

"We didn't do too much--just had some steamed baozi and sat for a while at Qinglong. It was so crowded everywhere. How come there are so many people in Taipei now?"

"Of course it's crowded," she says, smiling, "because there is only so much space here but the population has increased so much. How can it not be crowded? Otherwise, why would so many students go abroad each year? They can't stand the congestion here."

"You must be kidding! Is that why people leave Taiwan?" He takes off his shirt but hesitates as he starts to unbutton his pants.

"You can take them off. Dingya always wears very little at home. I'm used to it now. Why don't you sit close to the fan? I've already cooled down. They say that when your mind



settles down, your body will cool off as well. I'll go and get you some lemonade. Mom made it this afternoon and now is a perfect time to have some."

Handing him a large glass of lemonade, she returns to her chair and says, "Only after I became a mother did I realize how much mothers care for their children; it's a kind of concern above and beyond anything else. When Dingya and I had a fight a few years ago, I moved back home. Dad would either give me a distressed look or a lecture on morals and obedience. Mom didn't blame me and helped me take care of Xiao-rong. She also made me realize that when people are unhappy about something, they should set their minds on something else and not dwell on what's bothering them. You've changed so much during the past ten years; maybe it's because you've been too far away from Mom."

Sipping his lemonade, Tianlei begins to cool down and feel once again the pleasure of being with his family. "You're definitely right," he says. "Sometimes I do miss home. Before I came back, I told myself that if I felt comfortable about staying home and could become used to the environment again, maybe I would not come back to the United States. I would just teach at Taiwan University--I'm sure Mr. Chiu would love to have me back. I could teach somewhere else at the same time and also do some freelance writing. I'm sure that would give me plenty to live on. What do you think of that idea?"

Observing her brother attentively, Tianmei says, "Do you really mean that?"

"Yes, I do."

"I'm afraid that won't work. First of all, you'll definitely disappoint them," she says, pursing her lips at their parents' bedroom. "Emotionally they want you to stay, but for your own future they want you to go back. No matter what you say about the United States, they think you'll have a better future there. Don't ask me why they think that; I've never tried to figure it out. Maybe it's this era and this environment that make people think going to the United States is the best of all alternatives."

"What's your opinion on that? Why haven't you ever been interested in going abroad?"

Rolling the magazine in her hand, she ponders the questions for some time, then says, "At first I wanted to go, too, especially right after I received my bachelor's. Don't you remember helping me apply to American schools? Later my friends who had gone there wrote to me and told me about the difficult times they were having, and that made me hesitate about going. And while I was hesitating, Dingya got what he wanted. After we were married I was still thinking about studying abroad, but Dingya is the kind of person who is always content with where he is. He thought he had a pretty good job and his life was stable, so he had no desire to go anywhere, or to study English. And of course he didn't want

me to go by myself. So after having Xiao-rong, I gave up the idea entirely."

"Smart decision."

"I hadn't finished yet. Another objection to your staying would come from Yishan's family. You know, her parents encouraged her to write to you because they wanted to see you two together. Why do you think they want their daughter to marry you? Because you're more handsome or smarter than other men? Because Yishan couldn't get a boyfriend here? No. In fact there are lots of guys after her. She even went steady with a greasy-looking guy for some time, but her parents wanted her to marry a Ph.D. from America!"

"A Ph.D. from America? There are lots of them around nowadays; they're a dime a dozen. So why me?" he says, sounding indignant.

"Dad and Mr. Chen are old friends, so that makes it better because the two families already know each other. Also, I know you're saying you don't want to return--that may even be what you're thinking right now--but what will you do in the end? I don't think you'll stay."

"I noticed that you used the word 'return' instead of 'go' to the United States. You sounded as if I were from that country and came here as a guest."

"Oh, I didn't notice that. Maybe I said it without thinking because so many people have gone there and established themselves. They come back to Taiwan for a while,

return to the U.S., and then visit again in another few years. When they are here, their friends, families, even government officials, treat them as VIPs. None of them--almost no one--has ever stayed."

"But quite a few of my old classmates came back and settled here."

"What about the majority of them? Besides, things were different for those who chose to stay; their roots are here. But we--I don't know how other people consider us--I've never thought of myself as belonging here. This is simply my temporary residence; someday I'll return to the homeland. Although both of us came when we were young, my roots aren't here."

Finishing his lemonade, Tianlei turns the glass in his hand and says, "Then you think my roots are in America?" He puts down the glass, takes out a pack of cigarettes from his pants and lights one. Tianmei hands him an ashtray. Drawing deeply on the cigarette a couple of times, he says, "Gertrude Stein said to Hemingway, 'You are the lost generation.' What about us? I think we are the rootless generation. Yes, you guessed it--I will go back. And not just for Mom and Dad. They, especially Mom, would gradually forgive me if I disappointed them because I am their son. And it's not for Yishan. If she didn't want to marry me because of my decision to stay, I might be disappointed, but," he takes two more puffs on the cigarette, then stubs it out in the ashtray, "but I don't

think I would be too distressed. When I go back, I'll go back for my own reasons. Even though my roots aren't there, I've already become used to it, and I can reconcile myself to that. Besides, I kind of like a trace of nostalgia in my life. I've also found out that I'm rather used to life over there. The most important part is that I will have a happy hope, a hope that I can come back once every few years. And when I have such a hope, I can enjoy all the pleasures that come with it, such as our sitting face to face talking, like we're doing now."

"Remember we used to fight all the time because you never thought much of my opinions, and the more you tried to ignore me, the angrier I got?"

Tianlei starts laughing. "I remember once fighting with you over something and eventually I made you cry. I called you names--I don't remember what--it was something like 'you silly girl, you'll never be able to find a husband.' And after I left, you went into my room and tore up the manuscript of a short story I had written, which I was going to send to a newspaper. When I came home I grabbed your hair and bumped your head against the wall and said, 'I'm going to kill you!' Mom was scared to death and screamed: 'Tianlei, are you crazy? If you don't let go of her I . . . I'll call the police!' Do you remember that?"

"Of course I do. How can I forget? I still have a big lump on my head. Each time the weather changes I feel the

pain."

Tianlei stops laughing. "Are you serious?" he asks.

His sister bursts into laughter. Afraid to wake up her parents, she covers her mouth with a hand and says, "No, I was just kidding you. But you know, from then on I never got good grades in school. I think you must have damaged my brain."

"I've actually recalled that incident several times, and I couldn't believe we were adults already. When I was in the U.S., I sometimes wondered when I returned home if we'd still argue as we did before or be extremely polite to each other as if we were strangers. I didn't expect us to have such good talks together. Apparently there are advantages to being adults."

Tianmei is happy to have a brother who, after so many hardships in life and earning a Ph.D., can still talk with her on the same level. "Do you want more lemonade? I can get you more."

"No, thank you."

Seeing his polite manner, Tianmei cannot help giggling.

"I didn't say that on purpose; it's a habit for me already. Did you know Americans actually are very brutal beneath the surface? They're crazy about things like boxing and hockey, but they appear very refined and constantly say 'Thank you,' 'Sorry,' or 'Excuse me.' For them, those expressions are like 'Have you eaten?' for the Chinese." As he finishes, he starts

searching the cupboards.

"What are you looking for?"

"I remember Mom used to leave cookies in here."

"Are you hungry?"

"A little. I just had a few baozi for supper; that didn't last me very long, did it? In the U.S. people don't eat an elaborate meal for lunch; a lot of times they'll simply have a sandwich with some milk. But supper is important to them. Ordinarily they'll have a big slice of meat, some mashed potatoes, and a dessert--all very filling stuff. I haven't gotten used to light suppers yet."

"What would you like to have? I can fix something for you."

"Is there a restaurant nearby where I can have some tangyuan or zhongzi?"

"Actually there is. Let me take you to a place where you can have Ningbo-style tangyuan. Now that you mention it, I feel hungry myself. Let's go. We've got to remember to lock the gate this time--we don't want anybody to break in again." Picking up their shoes by the door, they tiptoe to the front yard, close the gate behind them, and put on their shoes. "You don't know how well-informed the thieves are here. They must know we have a visitor from America now who's got American dollars, so we have to be extra careful."

They wait for a pedicab but cannot find one. Finally when a taxi comes their direction, they stop it and get in. The

restaurant is in an alley near a theater, the interior almost identical to what he remembers of the restaurants along the railroad tracks: a stove, several dirty tables with cheap food heaped on top, uncomfortable chairs, patrons and the restaurant owner--all cramped in one small room. There are only five tables in the room, three of them already occupied, and an obtrusively bright light illuminates their cracks and filth. At a rectangular table sit two girls who look about twenty, one short and stocky, the other tall and slim, both working diligently at preparing food. The two big bowls in front of them contain stuffing for the tangyuan, one holding sesame butter and the other ground beans. Tianlei and his sister sit down at the only table left, one in the back of the room.

"Those two girls are the owner's daughters," Tianmei whispers to him. "This place has made loads of money. The owner has two houses, one in Tianmu and the other on North Sun Yat-sen. The second one has four stories and a garden in front of it. They say the owner earned a B.A. from abroad and after he came back he worked initially as a copy clerk at a government agency. But because he couldn't support his family with his income, he opened this little restaurant. Within just a few months his reputation spread and his business grew rapidly. Now several other places have opened up to compete with him, but none of them is doing nearly as well."

The owner approaches with a rag in his hand, picks up the



newspaper from the table and sets it aside, then hurriedly wipes the table. Even if his sister had not told him, Tianlei would still know from the man's thin hands and long fingers, more delicate than his own, that the owner was not in this business originally. He reminds Tianlei of his own past, the time when he worked in a restaurant in the U.S. How distant those days seem now! He, too, waited on tables to make a living, but his attitude toward the work was entirely different. This owner works of his own free will and always looks forward to the following day. But Tianlei hated what he was doing every day yet had to keep his anger inside. Each time he returned to his apartment at night he wished the world would just blow up the next day so he wouldn't have to suffer any longer. But the next day would inevitably come--always peacefully--and all he could do was bury his resentment and go to work with a forced smile on his face, serving customers who valued material comforts more than anything else in the world.

"What's the matter with you?" says Tianmei, touching her brother's hand on the table. "Have you decided what you want to order?"

He looks at the owner, who smiles at him and, with due respect, bows and asks, "What would you like, sir?"

"The sesame-butter tangyuan here is famous," says Tianmei. "Their zongzi is also good, and so is their hundun. I've ordered some hundun. Do you want to try them?"

"Sure. Then I'll have a bowl of tangyuan, a bowl of hundun, and a plate of zongzi."

"What are you doing, Tianlei?" Turning to the restaurant owner, she says with an air of pride and apology, "My brother has just come back from the United States, so he is crazy about any real Chinese food."

Tianlei forgot to ask his sister not to mention that he had returned from the United States. He kicks her foot under the table, but it is already too late. The owner, as expected, looks him up and down once more and says, "Congratulations, sir. What do you do in America? Do you go to school there or work?"

"My brother has earned a Ph.D. and is teaching at a university there," Tianmei interjects.

"Well, that's terrific! May I have the honor of knowing your name, sir?"

"Moe," Tianlei answers. Looking at his sister, he says, "Gosh, I'm starving."

The owner turns and goes to the stove to drop in some tangyuan, and in his native dialect relates the news he has just learned to his daughters, who turn and gaze at Tianlei.

"They're looking at you," Tianmei tells her brother, smiling.

"It's all your fault. Why did you tell them all that? I've already been interrogated more than enough about the United States during the past several days, yet you're

bringing me more trouble! When the man comes back and starts asking questions, I'm not going to say a word; you take care of him. Women's tongues are a little bit too long."

The owner brings their food, the dishes covering the entire small table. Afraid that the man might start asking questions again, Tianlei lowers his face while eating the tangyuan. Tianmei is about to warn him not to eat so fast when he suddenly screams and spits out a tangyuan into the bowl, his eyes brimming with tears.

"Tianmei, how come you didn't tell me it was so hot? It almost burned a hole in my throat."

"It's been less than two weeks since you came back yet you're already showing your true colors, blaming me for everything. Who asked you to eat in such a hurry? You acted like you hadn't had tangyuan in ten years!"

"Well, you are right about that," says Tianlei, pushing his bowl aside. He orders a fresh bowl of tangyuan and while waiting starts eating zongzi. "Mm, this is good. It really is! You know, just for the sake of having this kind of food all the time, it's worth staying here. After all, what does a person toil for every day? To earn good things to eat and drink! If you can't eat what you like, what's the point of all that hard work?"

"Then why don't we do this: I'll come here every day and learn the tricks of their trade. After that you can get me over to America. Then you don't need to teach school any

more; we can just open a little restaurant and start raking in the cash."

Tianlei shakes his head and continues eating. He has been to--in fact he has worked in--Chinese restaurants in the United States, and he knows how hard it is to manage a restaurant. Once he wanted to buy a car but couldn't afford it with the stipend he was receiving from the school, so he applied for a job at a Chinese restaurant near Chicago. Because he was Chinese and had some experience with that kind of cooking, he was hired as an assistant cook. The restaurant was owned by the wife of a Chinese professor, a Mrs. Yin. She was a smart lady who hired someone from Hong Kong as her chef and also got her two brothers to help out. She decorated the front of the restaurant with coiling dragons and phoenixes and hung red lanterns in the dining room, giving the entire place a holiday atmosphere. Every day she worked from nine in the morning until nine at night, assisting the cooks, taking care of the accounts, and also greeting the customers. When a cook took a day off, she filled in herself. She put one of her brothers in charge of ordering food supplies and the other one of supervising the waiters and waitresses, and all three of them also kept an eye on the staff, making sure no one was stealing things. Seeing how busy Mrs. Yin was all the time, Tianlei sometimes managed to come out of the kitchen and help her greet patrons. She hired a black girl to baby-sit her two children during the day, and if one of them got sick, she ran

back and forth between her home and the restaurant. Tianlei worked there on and off for about a year and witnessed the gradual decline of her health. Shortly after he left the job, he heard that the Yins had sold their restaurant and that the chef had gone to New York. Because of her poor health, Mrs. Yin had to enter a convalescent home, and her brothers had a bitter feud over money.

"Why don't you answer me, Tianlei? They say that nine out of ten Chinese that opened restaurants in the States made fortunes."

"That kind of fortune is hard-earned. Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't want to be in that business. I still prefer my way of life. Simple but comfortable."

He finishes his zongzi and tangyuan and starts eating the hundun, continuing the story of Mrs. Yin. "Nine out of ten Chinese restaurants in the U.S. get their business from Americans, and Americans are only fond of Cantonese-style dishes, things like chop suey, spareribs, and egg rolls. They don't have a taste for anything else. If you want to open a restaurant that specializes in Chinese snack foods, I bet you'll be out of business in three days, unless you're in New York where you can get enough Chinese customers. You can't survive anywhere else." Finishing the bowl of hundun, he sits back and lights a cigarette, exhaling the smoke slowly. "Good food. Very delicious!"

"Would you like anything else, Mr. Moe?" asks the

restaurant owner.

As he is about to order more, Tianmei says, "No, he's had enough for one day." Turning to Tianlei, she says, "We can come here again. You have plenty of time anyway."

"When will you return to America, Mr. Moe?" asks the owner. "I would like to seek your advice on something. My youngest daughter Zhenzhen is in her last year of college. I would like to send her to America after she graduates. Could you give us some advice on which schools to apply to and how to . . .?"

Seeing that her brother's expression is beginning to fade, she interrupts again, "Did you know there was an Overseas Studies Desk in the Ministry of Education? You may want to go there and check with them. They've got all the information you'll need. If you still have questions after you go there, then you can ask my brother the next time we come. I'm sure he'll be happy to help you then. How's that?"

By the time they leave the restaurant, the weather has cooled down and the streets are no longer crowded. Because Tianlei wants to see the alleys, they turn off from the street. The alleys are extremely narrow but clean. The houses on both sides are constructed in an orderly fashion, each enclosed by a high wall with tall trees in the spacious yard and a deep-red gate facing the alley. Several homes even have garages.

"A classmate of mine from high school lives there," says

Tianmei, pointing to a two-story house. "She married an American and spent a year in the States with her husband, and then came back. Maybe she didn't like it there. Her husband sends her a lot of money every month so she bought that house and asked her mother, who used to live in Hualian, to come and live with her. She has a car, too. But she doesn't socialize much."

"Is she divorced?"

"I'm not sure, but she's not using her husband's last name. See, that's her door plaque."

"Why doesn't she associate with people?"

"I don't know. She used to be cheerful and outgoing, but the last time I met her on the street she was a totally different person--very polite but rather cold, so that made me uncomfortable. She used to be really good looking--looked a little like Pier Angeli, the Italian movie star, but when I last saw her, she had lost her cute looks and personality."

"The next time you're in Taipei you should go and visit her," says Tianlei, his hands clutched behind his back. "The reason she doesn't mingle with people could be because she's afraid they might look down on her, so she stays away to protect herself." They turn left at the end of the alley and, after walking through another, reach Xinyi Road.

"Are you really going back to Tainan tomorrow?"

"I think I should. I've left my husband there alone for so many days; it's not fair to him. I got a letter from him

a couple of days ago. Even though he didn't pressure me to go back, he did complain about the meals our maid prepared and said he missed Xiao-rong. I think I'll just go back. When are you coming to the South? Dingya said once you decided the time, he was going to make arrangements for you." "I'm not sure at this point. Before I meet with Professor Chiu, I can't make any solid plans. Besides, I'd like to travel to the South with Yishan, but we need to find a way to get her parents' approval. If I could go with her, that would be ideal because that'll give us more of a chance to get to know each other. After being alone with her a couple of times, I feel there are quite a few differences between us. It's funny I don't feel as close to her now as I did when we wrote to one another. I have no idea why."

Tianmei remains silent. Yishan is a good girl, but perhaps because of the way she was brought up, she acts somewhat immature. Nevertheless, she is a good person. Tianmei likes her honest character. However, she has discovered since her brother's return that the two of them do not appear to be as perfect a match as she once thought. Based on his character now, the kind of companion Tianlei needs is one who is strong-minded and supportive, someone who is optimistic about life yet not so naive as to think there won't be obstacles. Yishan, on the other hand, is a girl who needs constant attention and care from somebody else. Because Tianmei has repeatedly been warned by her parents not to say anything to



discourage her brother's relationship with Yishan, she refrains from making her true opinion known to him.

"How can one expect a relationship with absolutely no differences in opinions? Even though you two wrote to each other for so many years, you were never together, so it's natural you don't feel you know her that well. I think you're right: if you can go to the South with her, that'll be perfect. Once you've decided when you're going to come, be sure to let me know."

At home, they both retire to their rooms. When Tianlei wakes up the next day about noon, his sister has already gone and left a note on his desk, asking him to visit her as soon as he can. He wanders around the rooms in his slippers. With Tianmei gone, the lively atmosphere of the house is also gone. His parents are not home either; he feels like a lonely visitor. He puts on his clothes, gulps down a piece of toast and the porridge his mother has prepared for him, then picks up the phone to call Shangfeng Chiu. The school tells him Professor Chiu isn't in that day. Disappointed, he returns to his room and starts looking for his friend Pingtian Zhang's address. Zhang lives in Zhonghe Village. He wants to go there by bus to show that he hasn't changed from his college years, but he can no longer remember which bus to take. He asks Ah-cui but she does not know, either. Finally he decides to take a taxi.

The Zhonghe of today is completely different from the one

in his memory. The place used to be bare, with few inhabitants and shops along the narrow streets. When the car reaches the main street, he discovers many stores and stands on both sides. In the scorching sun and tremendous noise, countless people mill about. Vehicles seem to go in any direction the drivers please, and the horns deafen his ears. The pedicab in front of his taxi moves along slowly. His chauffeur keeps pressing the horn while cursing: "You son of a bitch, why don't you move?" Unable to bear the scene, he takes out his wallet and says to the driver, "Why don't you let me out here? I can find the house myself."

The alley is equally crowded. When a car comes, pedestrians scurry out of the way, almost having to draw in their stomachs to let the car pass. With Pingtian Zhang's address in his hand, he proceeds, looking at the number on each gate. Every shaded area along the alley is packed with people--children wearing only shorts, some even without, most men topless, and women, their trousers rolled to the knees, waving fans.

An old man sits straight on a stool, his eyes closed, his mouth open, a shiny streak of saliva dripping on his bare and bony chest. The horns and the shouting in the alley have no effect on him. He reminds Tianlei of a comment made by an American friend of his who knew China well: "The Chinese are the most adaptive people in the world." Now he sees the logic.

In the middle of the alley he finds Pingtian Zhang's home. The entrance does not have a bell, so he pounds heavily on the vermilion gate. A while later a woman in a sleeveless dress and a pair of red wooden clogs appears before him, her legs uncovered. She looks pretty, but at the same time her impatient expression makes her look unpleasant.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Pingtian Zhang. Is he home?"

"He's taking a nap. Do you have to see him now?"

"I'm an old classmate of his." Tianlei did not want to mention where he had returned from, but curious what the woman's reaction would be, he adds, "My name is Tianlei Moe. I just came back from the United States. I would like to visit with my old friend sometime."

The tense expression on her face changes to a big smile, and the arm that blocked the gate makes a gesture of invitation. "Oh, you are Mr. Moe. Pingtian has been telling me about you. He was wondering if you had returned. Please, please come in. Our place is a real mess. I hope you won't mind. Please take a seat. I'll go and get him. He didn't come home till eight this morning. Working at a newspaper is really no easy thing! Please sit down. I am sorry about all the mess here."

## CHAPTER TEN

At Taiwan University everyone called Pingtian Zhang "Giant," for he was a head taller than most of the students and had an outgoing personality. He also had enormously wide shoulders, a dark complexion, and thick lips. If it weren't for his minuscule eyes, he could be mistaken for a macho movie character. He and Tianlei have been good friends since grade school. Even though Zhang stayed in a dormitory and Tianlei lived at home, they spent almost all their waking hours together. Zhang majored in agriculture initially and later switched to Chinese. Since he never excelled academically, nobody could see how he could appreciate poetry.

Zhang did not have a girlfriend in college. The girls either stayed away from him or treated him like a big brother, and he didn't seem to mind it. When Tianlei and Meili started dating, he often went along. Tianlei had hoped that his sister Tianmei would develop an interest in Zhang, so he hinted to Zhang that he should start courting her. The four of them did go out several times, but Tianmei never picked up on that suggestion and continued to treat Zhang only as her brother's good friend. Even though Zhang was favorably inclined towards Tianmei, he did not want to show he was interested in girls, so he didn't actively pursue Tianmei. When the time came to part, Tianlei and Meili cried, and all Zhang could say was "I don't know why you guys are crying."

At the airport terminal, when Tianlei was ready to board the plane, Zhang said to him, "Don't be so emotional. A tough guy never breaks down over a woman. You just watch me--when I need to get married, I will, but I'm not going to waste my time courting anyone. That's not my cup of tea."

After Tianlei went overseas, Zhang took over his job in the reference division of the newspaper, and lived a peaceful life with his mother. His letters to Tianlei were always brief, and never once did he mention girls. One day Tianlei unexpectedly received a wedding invitation from him. The girl's name was unfamiliar, so Tianlei inferred that the girl was not a classmate. In his letters Tianlei asked Zhang who the lucky girl was, but never got an answer. All Zhang told him was that he was doing fine in his married life. As time went by, they wrote less and less, and finally stopped.

A big man rushes out from the bedroom and stands in front of Tianlei, and because of his plump face, his eyes seem smaller. Unshaven, his face looks even darker. Seeing Tianlei, he opens his arms and Tianlei, thinking that his old friend is about to embrace him like westerners do, gets ready to respond. Instead, the man patted his arms.

"What a surprise! When did you arrive?"

"About two weeks ago," says Tianlei, shaking the man's hand. "How have you been, Pingtian?"

"You haven't changed a bit," his friend says, looking him

up and down. "You're still so skinny; you must not have digested all the beef you had in the States." Patting Tianlei on the back, he adds, "Good lord, you really are back!" Tianlei notices the happy expression on his friend's face and realizes that their friendship is still as strong as before despite the lapse in their communication over the years.

"Yes, I really am back," he says, grabbing Pingtian's hand. "I'm so glad to see you, Giant. You haven't changed either."

"Giant! I haven't been called that for years. That reminds me of so many things in the past. How have you been? I'm so glad you've indeed returned in glory. Look at me," says Pingtian, his hand gesturing at the small living room. Tianlei sees toys scattered on the floor, diapers, a wicker chair with a broken leg, a worn couch, a table warped by water, and a family picture on the wall. "Now I have six mouths to feed."

"A person has to go through that sooner or later," says Tianlei, smiling.

"What about you? Why are you still free?"

"Well, it's a long story," says Tianlei. "Where's your wife? Is she the one who just answered the door for me?"

"Yes, that's her. When you make just twelve hundred yuan a month, you can't afford a maid. I guess she's taking care of the kids. Why don't you sit here and relax while I go and make some tea?"

"There's no need to stand on ceremony with an old friend

like me. Why don't you go wash up? Then we'll go out and have some breakfast. My treat. Remember, I'm the one who's 'returned in glory'."

Holding his chin with one hand and clutching his waist with the other, Pingtian observes his old friend attentively. "You've changed a lot, Genius!"

"Of course. It's been ten years. You can't expect me to be exactly the same as before. You've changed, too."

"But you just said I hadn't changed a bit."

"I only meant your outside appearance."

"Well, I feel I'm still the same, inside and out. The only difference is now I'm always short of money, so I blame the system and my wife and kids for that."

"You were always short of money, except then you blamed me," says Tianlei, smiling.

"You still remember all that?" Pingtian says, smiling in return. "All right, I'll go and wash. Are you sure you don't want some tea?" Before Tianlei can reply, his friend is on his way to the bathroom.

About to light a cigarette, Tianlei hears children's voices through the back door, and two boys and two girls enter, followed by Mrs. Zhang, now in a lavender dress and wearing makeup.

"This is Uncle Moe," the lady announces. "And these are our children, Daping, Xiaoping, Wanxin, and Wanming. The two older ones are in third and second grades. Where's Pingtian?"

"He went to wash up," Tianlei says, standing awkwardly and not knowing what to say to the children. The girls resemble their father and appear more grown-up than their ages. Like their mother, the boys have fair complexions. When Mrs. Zhang goes into the kitchen, the four youngsters stare at Tianlei. Unable to find a topic, he searches his pockets and produces a few Kennedy half-dollars. As the children surround him, he hands one to each of them.

"Is this American money?" the older boy asks.

"Yes," says Tianlei. "But you can't use it here. It's for you to save."

"Can I get candy with this?" asks the younger boy.

"Of course not," the older girl interrupts. "Who is this person on the back?"

"Kennedy. He was an American president."

"Oh, is he the one that was shot?" the older boy asks, wide-eyed.

"Yes."

"Why do they put him on the coin?" asks the little girl.

"To remember him."

"Why?"

"Because . . . um. . . ." Tianlei can no longer give an answer.

Pingtian comes in clean-shaven, and seeing that his children have surrounded Tianlei, he says, "I see you've all met Uncle Moe. What's this?" He takes the coin from a boy's



hand and looks at both sides of it. "Did you bring this from America?" he asks Tianlei. "If you have an extra one, I wouldn't mind keeping it for myself."

"Sure," says Tianlei, taking the last one from his pocket. "It was just minted recently."

Pingtian takes the coin and puts it in his pocket. "It's unbelievable that American presidents' lives are in such danger," he says. "They walk on the streets and shake hands with people, and if someone wanted to hurt them, he'd have the chance to. Right?"

Nodding, Tianlei says, "But the possibility of the assassin getting away is very slim. Actually Kennedy had been warned not to give that speech, but he didn't listen. What a shame! He was such a gentleman--so knowledgeable, and attractive, too. I watched the news about his death and felt awful for days."

"Who knows, maybe his death made him more glorious," says Pingtian. "All right, let's talk about what concerns us. My wife suggests we don't eat out today. She's thinking about ordering some dishes from a restaurant and making some herself. We'll also get a good bottle of wine and then enjoy our meal at home. In case you really want to treat us to a dinner, we'll certainly give you a chance; we can't let you go so easily. Daping, go and bring the electric fan out here. Then you go and help Mom. Your dad wants to talk with the guest."

Tianlei and Pingtian spend the rest of the day talking, and from time to time Pingtian's wife brings them watermelon and iced tea but seldom joins their conversation. At supper time, the ordered food arrives--a mixed vegetable dish, hors d'oeuvres, braised fish--and Mrs. Zhang has made a couple of other vegetable dishes herself. She and the children eat in a separate room, and after she sends the children to bed, she comes out and sits to one side, listening to their conversation. Tianlei has never been good at drinking, but because his friend is a heavy drinker, he also drinks more than usual on that day. Initially the two of them reminisce about their old days at school, Tianlei's relationship with Meili, and then Tianlei tells about his ten years abroad. The wine and each other's company make them both talkative, and in the end they come to the topic of Yishan.

"I can't believe that with your looks, you haven't even found a wife in all these years. And I know you were pretty good with women."

"I don't know why, either. Maybe it's because of the field I'm in. The Chinese in New York say that the girls' first preference is doctors, and their second is Ph.D.s in the sciences. The rest are pretty much all at the bottom of their list."

"No kidding!"

"And I kind of think that's the case. I've had personal experiences. One summer I went to New York and visited

several bars. When the girls found out that I was a liberal arts major, they lost interest in me. I did actually take some of them out, but the dates didn't go too well, so I just stopped trying altogether."

"Now, tell me, where do those girls that can't get a doctor or engineer go?"

"They'll either have to lower their expectations or face the danger of becoming old maids. And when that happens, those guys that they once looked down upon will no longer be interested in them."

"Are all marriages there like that?"

"Not necessarily. There are also some based on love, for example, those couples that dated before they went to America or the ones who went to school in small towns. But in most big cities, marriages have turned into markets. Girls weigh you on a scale to see how much you are worth. If you have or can make a lot of money, they'll go out with you; otherwise, they'll just tell you they don't have the time."

"Why do they have to be this way? I can't understand why they can't simply be your friends."

"That's what's tricky about Chinese girls. When you date an American girl, she'll go out with you happily and both of you will have a good time. If you like her, the two of you can go out again. If it turns out to be otherwise, she'll still be nice to you the next time you see her. But Chinese girls? The first time you go out with her she'll either be

reserved or pushy, and neither, of course, is pleasant. If she has a good impression of you, she'll agree to see you again, and by that time she's already known pretty much everything she needs to know about you: your major, whether or not you have a Ph.D., and so on. If you pass her test, then your taking her out a second time is regarded as an indication that you are serious about her. She'll go around and hint to people that you're crazy about her and that you're going to propose to her in the near future and things like that. If you don't ask her to marry you the third time you two go out. . ."

"Then she'll ask you, right?" interjects Pingtian.

"Well, this hasn't happened to me, but it did to a friend of mine--pretty embarrassing situation," says Tianlei. "If she doesn't propose to you directly, she would at least give you hints that she wants your response. If you're only interested in a casual relationship, then sorry, she's never going to see you again. Lots of guys can't stand all that nonsense, so unless they're absolutely crazy about a particular Chinese girl, they would rather go out with Americans. American girls, compared to the Chinese, are much more open and friendly. After all, boys and girls get together because they're lonely, right? Nobody wants to be alone all the time, so they go out for a meal, go to a movie and enjoy a night together. Who wants to pay to suffer?"

"No wonder lots of Chinese guys are marrying foreigners

now."

"Well, there aren't so many actually. It's true these guys have been through a lot, but when it comes to women, they still tend to stick to those from their own background. Still. . ." He shakes his head.

"Aren't you speaking only from the men's point of view?" interrupts Mrs. Zhang, who has been listening. "I guess girls have their difficulties, too."

"Well said!" Pingtian exclaims. "I was just about to come to the women's rescue. Remember the 'chemistry genius' Liming Zhu, the dark cute girl who was a grade behind us? She went to a school in Minnesota a couple of years after you left. When she first got there, she was really popular; even some guys from schools nearby went to see her. I'm sure she was busy with her studies, but I also think she must have had a high opinion of herself and acted accordingly. As time went on, more and more Chinese girls arrived at the school, and even though none of the later ones could compete with her in looks, they were younger; so those boys that used to go after her shifted their attention to other girls. As she stayed longer at the school she had a better handle on her studies and the town. She also realized that she was not getting any younger, so she started thinking about settling down. But her choices had become limited. Her previous suitors were either married or already involved in relationships. There were still a few who showed interest in her, but she didn't care

for them. So she kept waiting for the perfect man to come into her life. After she earned a doctorate in chemistry, it became even tougher: men without Ph.D.s didn't go after her--I wouldn't do it either--who wants to be bullied by a more educated wife? And the Ph.D.s who were still available were either too old or weird; who knows, some of the older ones might have been married before. So she kept putting it off and she's still single. A relative of hers that works at the paper went to Columbia University last year and visited her. He told me she was really becoming nervous now; she would speak and laugh very loudly to get people's attention. Do you remember how she was before, how softly she spoke and how cute she was when she glanced at you sideways?" says Pingtian, glancing sideways at Tianlei, making his wife and Tianlei both laugh.

"There are lots of cases like that in the United States," says Tianlei. "Just in New York alone, there are too many to count."

"There must be happy families, too, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course," says Tianlei. "I wasn't saying there weren't happy couples." He suddenly thinks of Jiali and Boyuan Lu, their house on Nora Street in Berkeley, the family's tranquility, Boyuan's devotion to his career, and Jiali's teaching her son Chinese at home. . . . He also remembers several other couples, like the childless Zhangs who both worked at the library. Tianlei had visited them several

times and still remembers the Chinese paintings on their walls, the numerous Chinese books on their shelves, their single Peking opera record, Overlord and His Concubine by Mei Lanfang, which they played over and over again. Indeed, the most important thing for people away from their homeland is companionship, and Tianlei could never understand why so many couples let minor personal differences get in the way of happiness. What Tianlei admired the most in America was Chinese men who had families.

"Tianlei, are you all right?" says Pingtian, waving his wine glass in front of Tianlei's eyes. "You aren't drunk, are you?"

"I don't think I am yet," says Tianlei. "But I'd better stop talking before I say something stupid. Tell me, Pingtian, how come you were so lucky to find such a good wife? You know I was worried about you after I left because you never mentioned a word about a girlfriend in your letters. I thought you'd decided to be a bachelor forever." "Well, I'm one of those lucky ones who don't have to run around chasing women," says Pingtian. "See, she threw herself at me. Isn't that so, sweetheart?"

"Shame on you!"

"Tell me what really happened," says Tianlei.

"Well, actually it was pretty simple. I'm a practical kind of guy who isn't interested in a big romance or the unrealistic type of love that you only read about in poetry.

She was working at the paper and thought I was an honest and reliable person, so she acted nice to me. I noticed she was pretty good at her work and had a pleasant personality, and she wasn't bad looking either, so I responded to her interest. That was it."

"You guys are happy, I presume?"

"There is no reason why we shouldn't be. I work every day to support the family, and she takes care of all the housework and the four kids. We both work hard. I enjoy what I do and so does she, so we have no complaints. Even though our house is a bit small, we've paid it off on our own. That's something, isn't it? Now she's growing a garden in the backyard and we have some nice flowers and tomatoes. We can't afford to go out on Sundays, so we either work on the garden or take the kids to the Yuanshan Zoo. Our life is a bit monotonous, but we've lived like this ever since we got married, so we're used to it. When the kids all go to school, she'll probably be able to go back to work at the paper and then we'll have a bigger income. By then we might be able to make a trip to the South or go to the Sun Moon Lake, or maybe the Hualian area," Pingtian says, noticing a sympathetic look on Tianlei's face. "You might think our desires are pretty trivial, but I think if we don't expect too much we won't be too disappointed either, and that's how we make ourselves happy."

"That's not what I meant," says Tianlei, who is getting



emotional. "I was just telling myself that you were the truly happy ones. You know what life is all about."

"Don't use such big ideas on me. I never thought about things like the meaning of life; I never had time to. You know sometimes I wondered what it would have been like if I had gone abroad that year like you did. Maybe I'd still be just like you--still a bachelor! I'm glad I stayed; otherwise, where would I have found such a good wife?"

"That's enough flattery," says Pingtian's wife, her voice revealing a deep complacency. "Mr. Moe, when you come next time, why don't you bring your girlfriend over, too?"

"Good idea," says Pingtian. "Now tell me, how have things been going between the two of you? Is there any chance of her becoming Mrs. Moe?"

Embarrassed, Tianlei turns his eyes to Mrs. Zhang. Actually he wants to tell Pingtian everything because he needs the opinion of an impartial listener, a person who can truly understand him and will not, under any circumstance, laugh at him; and that is a main reason for his visit today. In college, they hid nothing from one another. After the ten-year interval, Tianlei thought they would act more formally toward each other, but Pingtian is still the same as before, so after a brief exchange of what they have done over the years, the two are once again close, and naturally Tianlei wants to know his friend's opinion about his relationship with Yishan. However, Mrs. Zhang is still new to him. Even though

she is his old friend's wife, Tianlei still feels awkward about discussing the matter in her presence. If Tianlei had to pour out his heart in front of her, it would be like asking him to undress in front of a girl in his dormitory.

"I see our scholar friend is still shy," says Pingtian to his wife. "So why don't you go to bed now? I'll tell you everything later anyway."

When the two are alone, Tianlei starts telling Pingtian about his relationship with Yishan, how they began writing to each other, how he felt when he met her in person and what his impressions were after they had gone out. In the company of his old, dependable friend and after some more good wine, he also pours out the whole story of Jiali. Setting his wine glass and chopsticks on the table, he tips his chair back, his eyes staring at the ceiling as if it were a reflection of the few short, yet memorable, moments he shared with Jiali. Her face was not pretty, but it had its own special charm that drew people's interest.

"I always had a feeling of security when I was around her," says Tianlei. "I felt I could rely on her. Actually she wasn't much older than me but she possessed a kind of wisdom that women seem to have. Her views on things were objective and sharp--perhaps because she was a writer--so each time after we spent time together, I felt comfortable, never lonely, restless, or depressed. I just wanted to be with her again. Maybe you'll think my life was too dull and anybody

whose interests were similar to mine could make me happy. Maybe it's true. You may also think that my feelings for her were caused by the situation I was in. Again, I say that's quite possible. But the sense of satisfaction and ease that she was able to give me just couldn't be found anywhere else."

"Did you want to be with her on a permanent basis?"

"I did once, but I didn't have the courage to. I wasn't sure how my parents would react to that and what other people would think of her. Also, I didn't know if pressure from the outside would influence our relationship. Besides, she had a child, too. I just wasn't sure if I could handle all of that."

"So you never changed."

Tianlei's eyes were still on the ceiling. Had he been so cowardly before? No, that couldn't have been the case, for he once agreed to a fight with somebody on the Ying Bridge. And another time he would have punched a scoundrel assaulting Meili at the International Theater if Pingtian hadn't stopped him. His courage weakened as he struggled alone in the U.S. When he first got there, he had to cope with all the difficulties of studying in a drastically different environment, not to mention the prejudice against Orientals that he gradually discovered and the loneliness that clung to him.

"You were always like this," says Pingtian with an assured air. "You were always uncertain about things. Remember, you

couldn't say good-bye to Meili but also couldn't decide to give up the chance to study abroad? At the airport your eyes were red, and you were still so full of doubts. I told you that all you needed was to make one decision and then stick with it!" Lowering his voice, he continues, "Well, past is past. What you need to deal with now is Yishan."

"You're definitely right," says Tianlei, turning his sight away from the ceiling as he squeezes the empty cigarette box into a ball. The full pack he had when he came is now gone, and he feels dry in his throat. Helping himself to more wine, he says, "Yishan is a lovely girl. I know I like her a lot, but there are pretty big differences between us. She has a lot of misconceptions about the United States and the life there, so if we were married and she went over there with me, how would she be able to adjust to an environment that's completely different from her imagination?"

"Easy. You help her."

Ah! But I need help myself, he thinks to himself. "The main problem is we are so different--we look at things completely differently. I think she's still very immature. Her ideas are too naive. She once asked me what kind of hardships I had gone through to make me so low-keyed. Actually I'm not; it's just that her idea of life is too perfect, as if the sun were always shining. I don't know how to say it. When we wrote to each other, I thought our ideas were pretty much the same; but after we met, I felt she was

almost like a child, and I had to go along with her all the time to make her happy. I don't know what I should do. Both her family and mine want to see us married here and then return to the States together. I'm not opposed to marrying her; it's just I'm not sure if I'll be happy after we get married."

"How does she feel about you?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think she hates me, but I also know that I'm not her first choice, either. The whole thing was pretty awkward for her in the beginning, too, because she didn't want to disobey her parents, but it's also true--and I believe it's been a deciding factor in our relationship--that she wants to go to the United States. Those two factors have definitely played a major role in her interest in me. If I were working at a Taipei newspaper like you are, I don't think she'd want to marry me."

"But didn't you just say she liked you?"

"Yes, that seems to be so. Besides, we've corresponded so long that I guess we more or less care for one another."

"So you do care about her."

Nodding, he says, "But it's not simply a man falling in love with a woman. It's more like a big brother caring for his little sister. You yield to her and play the game by her rules. That's all you can do. I wonder if a marriage can simply be built upon my caring for her and her not hating me."

"Why not? That's how we were. My wife didn't hate me, and

I didn't dislike her, so we got married. See, we're doing fine, aren't we? The problem with you is you think too much but never act. Too much thinking can make a person depressed. Marriage actually is a pretty simple thing. Both sides just have to say 'this is it' and then try to work out things together. Believe me, it can be done. Now, here's what I think you should do: go and spend more time with her. You never know, her naivete could turn out to be a lovely aspect of her, don't you think? If, however, you find out after you've spent more time together that there isn't enough of a foundation for you two to get married, then, as the old saying goes, running away is the best of the thirty-six alternatives. It won't do you any good to hang around worrying whether somebody's going to get hurt. When I said a while ago you hadn't changed a bit, I was talking about your inability to make up your mind." Glancing at his watch, Pingtian suddenly jumps up. "Gosh, it's already one. I've got to get to work. Come, let's walk together. When you visit us next time, why don't you bring her over?"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The second day after Tianlei's visit, an announcement about him appears in the paper where Pingtian Zhang works. It reads: "Chinese scholar, American professor, Tianlei Moe, Ph.D., returned to Taipei last month. A graduate in English from Taiwan University, Dr. Moe received an M.A. in journalism at Southern Illinois University and a Ph.D. from the University of California-Berkeley. Dr. Moe has met with Miss Yishan Chen, a graduate in business from Zhengzhi University, with whom he has been corresponding for the past several years. The parents of both families are preparing for their wedding. . . ."

After the news breaks out, many reporters, to Tianlei's amazement, come to his home eager to interview him about his relationship with Yishan. The publicity annoys him and makes him uneasy. Tianlei's parents not only graciously entertain the reporters, but they in fact even take great pleasure in disclosing every detail about his relationship with Yishan. His mother even goes as far as repeating all his childhood stories to the journalists, her face constantly showing the pride that parents have when talking about their children.

In the days that followed, such headlines appeared in various newspapers: "Young, Handsome Ph.D. from America Falls in Love with Beautiful Taiwan Girl," "Lovers Apart Finally Unite," and "Traveling Ten Thousand Miles for Love." The

articles covered Tianlei's return so extensively that they embarrassed him and for days he didn't dare to leave his home. He is not pleased by the enormous attention from the news media or his parents' willingness to meet the reporters. Since he cannot stop the reporters' curiosity or quarrel with his parents, he begs his parents not to receive any more journalists, and if they continue to come, not to answer their questions.

"How can we treat them that way?" his mother exclaims. "They don't come to hurt you. How can I not let them in?"

"But, Mom, you don't have to tell them everything about me. If they ask you questions, you can simply say you don't know. Then they won't come anymore."

"Tianlei," exclaims his mother. "Your father said you had become unreasonable in some ways, and I think there is some truth to that. Reporters' coming to visit you and writing about you is a good thing for our family. When the Tongs' son returned, he even held a press conference and later gave a speech at the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. He was in the news for quite some time. What have you done? You wouldn't let your father break the news to the papers, and when they found out about it, you won't let me talk to them. Don't you think you're being unreasonable?"

"Mom, can't a person want to keep a part of his life private? What good is there in letting the whole world know everything about you?"



"Listen to yourself! What's wrong with letting people know about your relationship with Yishan? Isn't it a good thing? Why keep it a secret?"

"I'm not talking about that, Mom! I don't know how else to explain it to you. Anyway, I want you to help me find a way to stay away from them. And don't let them bother Yishan either. She called me yesterday and said she didn't know how to answer some of their questions. If you don't listen to me, I'll have no choice but to leave early."

His last words have really done the trick. When reporters come to their house again, Tianlei's mother becomes reticent, saying, "I don't know" to almost all their questions, and after a couple of days, their family life returns to normal.

Since the news about Tianlei's return has appeared in the papers, he feels obligated to visit his former teachers at Taiwan University. At a party held in his honor at the home of the foreign language department chairman, Tianlei discovers that his former teachers are pretty much the same as before. He tried to get together with Professor Chiu on several occasions but couldn't reach him, so he is especially pleased to see him at the party. Professor Chiu, to his surprise, has changed quite a bit. Only in his early forties, the professor is almost completely bald, his bare head setting off his thick, dark brows. He has gained a lot of weight, making his T-shirt bulge.

Smiling, Professor Chiu shakes hands with Tianlei and pats

his shoulder. He was one of the teachers whom Tianlei admired the most. Not only was his English good, but he was also very knowledgeable in both Chinese and Western literature, and was receptive to new literary trends. What impressed Tianlei the most was his attitude toward his students. Tianlei frequently went to his place to talk with him. He treated his students, especially the more talented ones, like close friends and spent many an evening chatting with them in his small, packed, and smoky apartment. Tianlei took all the classes Professor Chiu taught, composition, British literature, nineteenth-century American literature, speech and debate, and others. Though not a very impressive speaker, and even nervous from time to time, he was always well prepared for his classes, and he explained the material thoroughly.

Prior to his departure for the United States, Tianlei had spoken with Professor Chiu about whether or not he should go into another field. Professor Chiu advised him to study comparative literature and also encouraged him to write. He told Tianlei that some people, such as himself, were made to do research and to teach, while others, like Tianlei, were naturally equipped with the talent to write. He wanted Tianlei to use the knowledge he gained from reading to help him launch a writing career. Tianlei followed his advice and, when he got to Southern Illinois, continued to study English literature. Later, however, he discovered that his undergraduate studies in English hadn't adequately prepared

him for advanced studies in the same field in America. Also, he kept receiving letters from his father, who repeatedly asked him to consider studying engineering. Meanwhile, he also witnessed the despondent attitude of liberal arts majors and began to wonder if he should indeed make the switch. Because the burden on his mind became increasingly heavy, he decided to write to Professor Chiu and ask for his opinion. In his reply, Professor Chiu strongly recommended that Tianlei not give up liberal arts, and that if he really found it difficult to continue in English, he should consider switching to journalism because then he would still be in contact with literature instead of dull theorems and formulas; and after he graduated, he could work for the news media or start a writing career. He wanted Tianlei to look at things from a broad perspective because, in his words, "science is the foundation of a building, whereas liberal arts are its shape--the part which makes the structure complete and beautiful. The purpose of laying a good foundation is to construct a good building. Constructing the building is our job, and you are talented at it. One should never adopt a near-sighted approach and go into a field he will not enjoy."

Although he was the one who made the decision to switch to journalism, Professor Chiu's words made him think. He did blame the professor several times when he encountered difficulties in his new field and when he ran out of money, but his gratitude to him was beyond description the day he

received his Ph.D. Because of their busy schedules they lost touch after that exchange of letters, but Tianlei learned from others that Mr. Chiu was promoted to associate professor shortly after he had left and that he also spent a year at Stanford University on a Ford Foundation research grant. When Mr. Chiu was in Chicago, he tried to get together with Tianlei but failed to locate him. Within two years following his return from Stanford, Mr. Chiu became a full professor, and Tianlei occasionally saw his articles on Fitzgerald and Faulkner in academic journals. But he never heard anything about whether or not he had a family.

At Taiwan University, Tianlei knew that Mr. Chiu liked a student named Shanshan Ye, a popular girl who did not apply her talents to her studies. When the word was out about his interest in Miss Ye, Tianlei could not believe it. Later, however, he saw them together at the New World Theater when he went to a movie with Meili. He was somewhat disappointed to see his teacher with such a frivolous girl and thought that he should have chosen someone more delicate and intelligent. The girl later married someone who worked in the Foreign Ministry and went abroad with her husband when he received a foreign assignment. Mr. Chiu was in severe depression for some time, spending almost all his spare time smoking and meditating in his tiny room. That was all the news Tianlei had received about his love life.

"Ah, Tianlei, it's so nice to see you again," says Professor Chiu. "When did you arrive?"

"About a month ago," says Tianlei, his face lighting up. "I went to your place to look for you several times but you weren't home. I also called the department but couldn't reach you there either. I thought you had left. I can't believe I'm seeing you today."

"I took a trip to southwest Asia," says Mr. Chiu. "I'm so glad you're back. Are you here to teach?"

"Well, I would like to," he says, noticing that the other professors are also waiting for his answer. "But I'm afraid I can't this time. I'm on a short leave from the school over there."

"Oh, you teach there now? That's wonderful. I heard somebody say not long ago that you were working for an insurance company. What do you teach there, Chinese literature?"

"No, not exactly. I teach the Chinese language," he says, noticing the surprised look on Professor Chiu's face. "Of course, occasionally I teach a literature course, too," he adds.

The chairman's wife asks everyone to come to the table. Rising, Tianlei proposes a toast to the hosts and the other teachers, and everyone returns a toast, praising him and hoping that he will someday be able to teach for his alma mater. The hostess has prepared all the dishes herself, the

food delicious and not greasy the way it is in restaurants. Although no one still treats him as a student, Tianlei cannot forget that they once were his teachers, and he feels somewhat constrained. Fortunately Mr. Chiu sits next to him, so they talk about other teachers and students that they know, making Tianlei feel that the clock hasn't completely stopped ticking.

When the party is over, he and Mr. Chiu leave the house together.

"Why don't we go to my place for a while?" says Mr. Chiu.

"Sure. Are you still at the same place?"

"Would I have the money to buy a house?" he grumbles self-mockingly.

In the dark, Tianlei cannot see Mr. Chiu's face, even though the tone of his answer indicated dissatisfaction. "What I meant was. . . ." Tianlei wanted to ask him if he had started a family but didn't know how to word it, even after all the drinks he had at the party.

"I know what you were getting at," says the professor. "I'm still a bachelor."

Mr. Chiu's small room used to be disorderly. Now it is even worse: the bed is a mess; on the floor next to the head of the bed is a pile of books, on top which are a wine glass, an ashtray, a matchbook, and an empty pipe, with ashes and tobacco scattered on the floor. The air is a mixture of smells from the pipe, alcohol, books, and dirty clothes. Mr. Chiu moves the things on the chair to his bed and asks Tianlei

to sit down, then moves the stuff on the bed to his desk to make room for himself to sit, and finally cleans a small space on the desk and pours some sorghum wine into two glasses and some peanuts onto a clean sheet of paper.

"Don't be scared," says Mr. Chiu. "The glasses were bought recently and haven't been used. The peanuts are in shells. I guarantee you they'd pass the health standards in the U.S."

Tianlei wants to laugh but holds back. He sips the wine and starts eating the peanuts, showing his host that he is not the least suspicious of his things.

"This little room alone will scare all women away," says Mr. Chiu, throwing a dozen shelled peanuts into his mouth. "I don't care anymore. I've passed that stage. Actually I kind of like the way things are right now. Tell me, why did you end up teaching Chinese? Isn't that pretty boring?"

Tianlei likes Mr. Chiu's straightforwardness; in fact, his close friends, such as Pingtian Zhang and Jiali, all have this quality. "It's not interesting at all," he replies. "And I did try newspapers. I'm not as good as the Americans when it comes to writing headlines, news stories, and editing, so who'd want to hire me? Do free lance as a career? Americans can hardly survive on that, so why should I even try? It's not that I don't want to be a writer; who would put food on the table for me? You don't know how much time I spent trying to find a job that would give me enough to live by. Finally I got one at an auto insurance company, so my living was taken

care of. But after a couple of years it became a drag, so I decided to go into teaching. You asked me why I didn't teach Chinese literature. Well, I would love to do that, except very few students would be interested in it. That's not to say that Americans were so hot on learning Chinese; their government and schools encourage them to take foreign languages."

Rising, Shangfeng Chiu searches for his pipe. Tianlei picks it up from on top of the matchbook and hands it to him.

"That one is no good anymore; it's plugged," says Mr. Chiu. "I've got at least ten of them here in this room. It's strange I just can't find any."

Locating a pipe underneath the bed, he stuffs some tobacco in the bowl and lights it. "You must have been asked this before," he says, "but why wouldn't you want to come back and teach? We've got some very good journalism schools here and I'm sure you'd have no problem teaching in one of them. I can understand why those in engineering and the sciences don't want to come back, but it puzzles me why liberal arts majors would also rather stay there and do meaningless work than return."

Tianlei remains silent. Certainly he has been asked the question "Why not return to Taiwan?" many times. He has asked himself even more often. Why not return? There is no particular reason. The only answer that appeared to make some sense to people is "Others don't, so I don't want to, either."



He vaguely remembers asking himself before going overseas why he wanted to study abroad. His answer seems to have been "Others do, so I will, too," as simple as that. The most important aspect, which he doesn't even deny himself, is vanity, because studying and living abroad is something that people--at least those in Taiwan--admire, and being admired is the best way to satisfy one's ego. So no matter what kind of price he pays to keep his pride up--loneliness or anything else--he does it voluntarily. He hates his own false sense of pride but cannot get rid of it. He has wished to make a decision that others can't, or do not want to, but has lacked the courage to do so. "Actually I would love to stay and work here, but. . . ."

"Let me tell you something that I haven't told others," interjects Mr. Chiu. "While I was at Stanford that year, a school on the West Coast offered me a Chinese-teaching position with pretty good pay and said I could also teach a course of my choice each semester. I was quite tempted by that, thinking I would be able to make a fairly decent living right away and have some extra cash in my pocket. Also, I would have lots of time to read the books that I wanted to read and enjoy all the comforts that only advanced countries could offer. I almost decided to accept the offer, and many of my friends urged me to do that, but I finally decided not to."

"Why?"

Silent, Mr. Chiu puffs on his pipe, his eyes scanning the room, the yellowed sheet and pillowcase on the bed, the desk piled with books and paper, the dusty fan in a corner, the socks and clothes thrown all over, and the numerous matches on the floor. "I just can't leave this nest," he says, picking up his pipe again and staring at Tianlei. "It is dirty and messy, but it's where I belong. This is the place that gives me pleasure and peace. Before I left for Stanford, I dreaded coming back to this room because it was so disorderly, so I left here happily. But shortly after I got there, I began missing this place and realized what it meant to me."

"You are lucky to have a nest like this; I don't."

"But you have a home to return to, and your family to be with. Isn't that ten times as good?"

"But," Tianlei says with a forced smile, "both my parents, believe it or not, want me to return to the U.S."

"I believe it," says Mr. Chiu, his brows knit. Tianlei notices a vertical line between his eyebrows and lines from the corners of his nostrils to the corners of his mouth. It is true he has gained some weight, but he is indeed looking older. "This is what's strange about the Taiwanese nowadays. Everyone, no matter what age or in what field, thinks that studying in America and staying there is the only road to happiness. This mentality puzzles me!" Looking at Tianlei, he says in an earnest tone, "But I hope you will not make a

decision simply based on others' expectations. You should rely on your own conscience and do what you feel is right for you."

"The problem is," says Tianlei, "I don't really know what I want." He had always considered Mr. Chiu a teacher and a friend, someone to whom he could tell anything. That feeling remains the same today. "When I was over there," he says, "I wished I could come back. I felt that just the opportunity to return to my hometown and to be with my family is worth giving up all that I had worked for over the years. But after I returned, I felt different. This place doesn't seem to attract me enough to make me want to stay permanently. The reality that I found most difficult to accept is I am treated as a visitor. I don't feel I belong here."

"It's natural that you feel you've lost touch with this place," says Professor Chiu. "Anybody who's been gone for so long would feel the same way. If you decide to stay, I hope you will be willing to teach at least one course in our department, and perhaps we can work together on a publication to introduce Western writers and their works to Chinese readers. That's something I've thought about doing for a long time, but I haven't been able to find the right person to work with."

Shelling peanuts and lining them in a row, Tianlei says, "I don't know what to say, Professor Chiu. I really don't."

"It won't hurt to think more about it. I hate to lecture

you on why you should stay, but I really don't think we liberal arts people have to rely on the high technology in America to work. What we need is imagination and applying it to our own environment. Wouldn't you agree? Why don't you stay for a year or two and see how you like it here. You are a U.S. citizen, aren't you?"

Shaking his head, he says, "No, but I can live there permanently if I want."

"See, there isn't a single problem with it. You stay for a couple of years, and if you don't like it here, you can always go back."

"That perhaps is a good idea," says Tianlei.

"I'd be so glad if you decided to stay. Think about how much we can do together in the next couple of years. I have lots of plans that I'd like to talk to you about," says Mr. Chiu. "It's funny; I asked you here to chat, but I ended up recruiting for the university." Taking the line of peanuts in front of Tianlei and putting them into his mouth, he asks, "Was what Professor Wang just said true or was he just joking?"

Knowing that he was referring to Yishan, Tianlei nods with an embarrassed smile.

"How does she look? Do you have a picture of her?"

Taking a photo from his wallet, he hands it to Professor Chiu, who, finding his spectacles and putting them on, takes a close look at it. "She is pretty, a lot more good-looking

than, what was her name . . . oh, right, Meili Zhang. Professor Wang said you'd already decided on the big day. Is that so? Don't forget to send me an invitation."

"That part is not true," says Tianlei. "The reporters made it up." He then gives Mr. Chiu a condensed version of the story, and, afraid to be interrogated, he turns the table on the professor. "What about you?"

"Me? Oh, nothing has happened to me. Wasn't that obvious the minute you entered the room?" As Mr. Chiu is about to fill his glass again, Tianlei, covering it with one hand, declines. Mr. Chiu fills his own. "I wish we had some stewed pork to go with this," he says, sipping his wine. Seeing that Tianlei still seems to be waiting for a matter-of-fact answer, he adds, "I no longer think about getting married. Love seems to be something imaginable but unobtainable. Quite a few of my friends have tried to fix me up with somebody, but it's like throwing six different paintings together to make a landscape: it never works. Have I ever told you what kind of a woman I would like to have as my wife? Very simple: a real woman. That type is hard to find now. The women nowadays are either too ambitious and intimidating, wanting to beat men in every way, or too wishful and naive, dreaming of becoming movie stars overnight. The former can hardly be called women, and the latter aren't adults. They've all lost women's essential qualities. I can't stand either a manly woman or a big baby. That's why I'm still a bachelor."

Laying his wine glass on the desk and picking up his pipe, he stacks his quilt and pillow and leans against them. "But I must also admit that I have met the ideal type of women; their intelligence and looks are just at the right level, they dress elegantly, and they know how much to talk." Extending his arms into a more comfortable position, some tobacco falling onto the bed, he adds, "But the problem is: how could they be interested in a poor professor like me? So I stopped dreaming and told myself to be satisfied with the chaotic life that I now have."

Seeing that Mr. Chiu is getting drunk, Tianlei gathers his courage and says, "Didn't you once like a girl named Shanshan Ye?"

Mr. Chiu motions with a finger for Tianlei to stop. "She was a very nice girl, expect that she was so sentimental and naive, perhaps because of her age. If she had a mature person to be with, she'd grow out of that stage. She was indeed sentimental. A real woman, of course, has to have a certain amount of that."

Tianlei suddenly thinks of Jiali. She would fit Mr. Chiu's definition of a real woman; she was sufficiently intelligent, honest, and sentimental. "I certainly agree with you on that," says Tianlei.

"I'm so glad that we finally agreed on something tonight. It's worth celebrating! Here, have some more wine. Later we can buy some cold cuts and chat the whole night. What do you

say?"

Looking at his watch, Tianlei says, "Maybe next time. It's so late already."

Not wanting to push Tianlei to stay, Mr. Chiu says, "All right, let's call it a night. I'll walk out with you. I need to get something to eat."

"I don't think you should drink more tonight," says Tianlei, his eyes on Mr. Chiu's potbelly and chubby face. "Too much wine may not be good for you."

"Don't worry about me. I spend quite a lot of time drinking alone these days. I need some alcohol to get my head going. I'll need to start preparing for the next semester. Why don't you give some thought to what I suggested tonight?"

"I certainly will," says Tianlei as they step out of the room. Outside it has become cool, the wind blowing from the farm fields, the sky dotted by shiny stars, their brightness gently disturbed by the slice of moon. A timeworn bus passes on the street, a few sleepy passengers sparsely seated in it, their bodies swaying to the movement of the vehicle, the dust rising and falling onto the wide palm leaves. Everything appears familiar yet new--the street, the buses, the nightwalkers, the whole view. He used to know the exact number of trees lining the street, but he can no longer recall it. Walking while listening to Professor Chiu, happiness as well as sorrow comes to his mind. He was happy that some of the scenes have revived his memories, but sad at the

realization that he had indeed been away for ten years and lost touch with this place.

At the entrance to an all-night restaurant they stop. Mr. Chiu shakes hands with him.

"Think more about it," says Mr. Chiu. "No matter what you decide, please let me know as soon as you can."

"I certainly will," says Tianlei, who feels slightly dizzy and tired, his heart both happy and sad. "But I hope I can get to see you again before I make the decision."

"Of course, anytime."

Locking his bicycle, Mr. Chiu goes into the restaurant, and Tianlei walks home along Xinsheng Street South.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

Shortly after he met Professor Chiu, Tianlei had to attend more banquets. It was early July, and some Chinese professors who taught sciences and engineering at American universities had just been invited back to Taiwan to teach summer school. They were warmly welcomed by government and school officials, and the news about their return became daily headlines in the newspapers. Since Tianlei also taught at an American university, he also received invitations to the banquets. He had planned not to go because he had seen how liberal arts and law majors had been slighted. Another reason for not wanting to go was that he was afraid he might be forced to say something against his own wishes. But this time his father was resolute. He wanted Tianlei to go because he didn't want to see any officials disappointed. He also considered the invitations a great honor for the family and thus must not be declined. He actually wished to see Tianlei take Yishan along, but Tianlei firmly refused, almost creating another unpleasant episode before Tianlei's mother intervened. She spoke for her son, and in the end, the father, sighing and shaking his head, agreed to let his son go without Yishan.

At the banquet, Tianlei meets the kind of colleagues that he has frequently met in the U.S. They have Ph.D.s in the sciences or engineering, good incomes, happy families, and stomachs bigger than most Chinese. They are the ones whom

Tianlei admires, envies, and occasionally disdains. The science professors lead mechanical lives: they live in their own spacious houses, surrounded by the laughter of their children, read kung fu novels, and play mahjong to kill time. Tianlei admires them because they are ignorant of the ugly side of human life like that portrayed in Norman Mailer's An American Dream, the abhorrence of mundane existence as depicted in Pinter's Lover, entrapment in reality as shown in Kafka's Metamorphosis, and the loneliness and despair in Arthur Miller's After the Fall. They would not have experienced the hollow and terrified feelings so natural to the literary reader. Though they may still want more out of life, they can at least be temporarily satisfied by their accomplishments. Tianlei admires them because of their simple minds and, at the same time, cannot help feeling sorry for them. As for himself, he would rather not have the luxury of this kind of simplicity; whatever satisfaction he can derive from his painful studies pleases him more. He would rather endure the pain of searching for the true meaning of life.

It is also true that he envies those professors, for they are happier, wealthier, more peaceful and optimistic. Even so, Tianlei has always felt fortunate not to have become one of them.

In the course of the banquet, Tianlei feels slighted, not only by the hosts but also by the other guests. The professors, even though he is one himself, greet him politely,

and one asks, "What did you specialize in in the U.S.?"

"Journalism," Tianlei replies.

"Well, that must not have been easy. Where do you work?"

"I teach at a college."

"That's terrific. I'm in the same profession as you. You teach journalism?"

"No, I teach Chinese."

"Oh, I see," replies the man with a smile, coughing gently. "Which school do you teach at?" Tianlei realizes that the man is asking questions that are more important to American-Chinese professors than anyone else: where they teach and what ranks they hold.

"At a small school near Chicago."

"Oh, I see. I teach at UCLA. That's nothing. That's nothing. Just trying to stay alive."

At the third banquet Tianlei meets an old schoolmate named Xinhuang Yuan. Had his old acquaintance not greeted him first, Tianlei would not have recognized him. Yuan majored in legal studies at Taiwan University. He and Tianlei got to know each other well while serving in the military. After they were discharged, both continued school in the United States. As soon as he arrived, Yuan switched to mathematics and started again from the freshman level. When Tianlei first heard this, he became worried, afraid that Yuan would not be able to survive. Later he learned from others that the switch was indeed hard for Yuan, and that he couldn't find any time

to work while going to school and also had to stay up very late every night to finish his homework. Worse, Yuan had to borrow thousands of dollars from his brother's friends to continue school. One summer while Tianlei was working in New York, he heard a former classmate say that Yuan was no longer as heavy as before, wore thick glasses, and mumbled constantly as if he suffered from a mental disorder. A few years later, Tianlei heard that Yuan was in graduate school at Penn State and had won a sizable scholarship for his studies. Some years later Tianlei learned that Yuan had obtained a Ph.D., got a teaching job at Yale, and was courting the oldest daughter of a prominent general from the Sino-Japanese War. After that Tianlei lost track of him. During the entire ten years in the U.S., they never met once, and Tianlei is very surprised to see him today at a party for overseas scholars. Yuan is a lot chubbier now than when he was in the military: thick flesh droops from the corners of his mouth and seems to weigh down his ears. Behind the bottle-thick spectacles, his eyes seem half of their former size. His hair still hangs down to his eyebrows as it had when he and Tianlei were in school together. Even though his waist is plump, his legs are still thin. With his enormous head, big chest, fat stomach, and skinny legs, it appears he may lose balance any time and fall.

"Hello, Tianlei, I'm so surprised to see you here," says Xinhuang Yuan, squeezing through the crowd. He shakes Tianlei's hand and pats him on the shoulder before rubbing

his own hands together--a habit from his military days. Every time he received a letter from his girlfriend, he would rub his hands in excitement.

"Xinhuang, I didn't expect to see you here, either," says Tianlei happily. "When did you come back?"

"I've just arrived. What about you?"

"I came about a month ago. Are you here to...?"

"I'm teaching summer school at Xinzhu for two months. I can't believe I'm seeing you here in Taiwan. Do you realize we haven't seen each other for ten years?"

"Yes, but I often heard about you. I knew you were doing very well."

"I am flattered," says Yuan. "Come, let's go out for a few minutes. It's still early anyway." Turning to a colleague, he says, "Would you come to the reception room and get us when we are ready to eat? I've just run into an old friend and we're going over there to chat for a while."

The minute they sit on the couch in the elegant reception room, a waiter brings them tea.

"Tell me," says Yuan, "did you come back to teach, see your family, marry, travel, or what?"

"Teach? Am I qualified to do that here?" says Tianlei. "I didn't work as hard as you did in school, I'm not a famous, first-rate mathematician like you, and I don't teach in one of the best schools in America. Who'd want to pay high salaries to invite me back?"

"Well, I wish you wouldn't talk this way. You're in journalism, am I correct? Yes, that was your major."

"I wish it were something else. I studied journalism in college, but I'm teaching Chinese. It's a profession that's not valued in either the United States or Taiwan. I think I need help from you."

"You're joking again. Tell me, how are your parents? You live at home now, don't you?"

"They're fine. Thank you. They once asked me about you, and I told them you had switched to the most popular field, math."

"I did that simply for the sake of survival. You can imagine what kind of dead end I would have run into had I stayed in law. I guess I'm living okay now, but the first few years after I went into math it was hell. You wouldn't believe how tough it was."

"Well, hell led to heaven in your case then."

"There you go again. I'm not doing better or worse than anybody else. I'm just in the middle, living an average person's life. I used to like math when I was in elementary school, so even though it was tough at first, I didn't really mind. Now I'm teaching, and it's something that I always wanted to do, so I'm happy where I am, except I could be paid better. What about you? What have you been doing? I met Mr. Li in New York not long ago and he said you were teaching, too. Do you like it? I remember when we were in the service,

you always wanted to enter the American literary scene. Have you been writing these past years?"

"All your dreams have come true, but not mine. How can I sound excited? Enter the American literary scene? Hm, only if you can come up with a mystery like discovering millions of dollars in a suitcase or something; otherwise, how can you compete with American writers who don't even know other languages exist besides English? That dream was shattered a long time ago. I was quite hopeful when I changed to journalism, thinking that I wouldn't have to write novels to make a living. But things didn't turn out to be as simple as I had thought. The small papers had very limited budgets so their job openings were rare; the bigger ones only hired accomplished reporters, so how could they even consider me? Besides, my journalism degree wasn't from Columbia or the University of Missouri. So there went my second dream. I'm sure you'd laugh at me if I told you I was teaching Chinese at a small college using elementary texts."

"No. Why would I laugh at that?" says Yuan, his face serious. "I know people with Ph.D.s who teach Chinese. I think it's a noble thing that they're doing. Think about it. Americans have so many misconceptions about the Chinese that really annoy me. So the first thing to do to change the situation is to help them learn Chinese so that they'll be able to read our books."

"God knows how long that would take!"

"The time wouldn't matter. As long as they got a good understanding of China, we would owe that bit of progress to you Chinese teachers."

"Of course you're in a position to say such noble things. But isn't it most important to do what you enjoy? If I don't like what I do, how can I do a good job? My desire, since I first went to the United States as a student, has not been to teach Chinese."

"I know. I can understand your plight. But as you know, everything takes time. For you, you can teach for a few years and try to get a job at a newspaper later, or perhaps besides teaching you can write a book. Wouldn't that be what you always wanted to do? One has to have a certain amount of patience. The four years that I spent working on my second bachelor's seemed like four hundred, but I stuck it out. Just listen to me, someday you'll. . ."

"Why don't we talk about something else?" interrupts Tianlei, who can no longer stand Yuan's hollow consolation. "I heard a few years ago that you were after a really fashionable young lady. What's become of that? Did you get her? I see you have a ring on."

Smiling radiantly, Yuan spreads his fingers and touches his ring. "She has returned with me. She said she needed to go to another party for a while, but she should be here now." Lowering his voice, he adds, "It really took me quite a bit of effort to get her. When I started courting her, I was in



graduate school. She didn't show much interest in me. But I didn't give up. I went to see her in New York almost every single weekend, and when I received an offer from Yale, she suddenly became nice to me. Her family cares about that sort of thing."

Tianlei remains silent, wondering if the society is to blame for this behavior or the individuals themselves.

"What about you?" says Yuan. "How come I don't see a ring on your finger?"

"I'm not a mathematician or teaching at Yale. Who'd want me?"

"What kind of talk is that? Not all families are like my wife's!"

Tianlei forces a smile. Just when Yuan is about to say something, a short-haired young lady in a chic maroon satin suit walks towards them. "Oh, there's my wife. Let me introduce you to her. Aixin, this is Tianlei Moe, my old schoolmate. We were in the service together."

"Oh, nice to meet you," says the young lady in English, holding out her hand in a maroon glove. Her father's wealth permits her the elegance she has, which shows in her smile, walk, and speech.

Since Tianlei's return, he has deliberately attempted not to mix English words in his speech in order to avoid people's dislike of westernized Chinese. Now faced with a Chinese lady who chooses not to speak with him in Chinese, he doesn't know

how best to respond.

"Oh, Tianlei, I forgot to tell you," says Yuan, "my wife grew up in New York, so it's easier for her to speak in English. She understands everything you say in Chinese, though."

"I see. How do you do, Mrs. Yuan?" says Tianlei in Chinese. "How do you like Taipei?"

Seating herself, she takes off her sunglasses. Holding the corner of a small perfumed handkerchief with one hand, she wipes her cheeks and the sides of her nose with the cloth wrapped in three fingers of the other, her eyes glancing suggestively at her husband. "God, it's so hot here. I can hardly stand it," she says. "Before we came, Henry was warned not to come because of the heat, but he wouldn't listen. We have a villa in Newburgh where we normally go and spend three months in the summer, but this year he insisted on coming here to teach summer school. I don't see the point."

"You know my main reason for coming is to have a chance to see my parents," says Yuan with a smile, rubbing his hands.

"If it hadn't been for that, I wouldn't have listened to you!"

"It really is hot here," says Tianlei. "But you'll get used to it after a while."

"I'm not sure. I've gone to Xinzhu, where Henry teaches. The houses there are pretty nice but there are no trees, and the wind is terrible. I don't think I want to live there."

I'll stay in the National Guesthouse for a couple of months. It's at least a city here; Xinzhu's got nothing. I'd be bored to death staying there for two whole months. What about you, Mr. Moe?"

"Me? What about me?"

"Are you living in Xinzhu?"

"He isn't here to teach," interjects Yuan. "He came to visit relatives."

"Oh, really? Did your wife come also?"

"He's not married," says Yuan. "When we get back, I'll help him with that."

Yuan's colleague comes and asks them to go to the table. The hosts each propose a toast, speaking highly of the accomplishments of their guests--the remarks not meant for Tianlei--and invites them to enjoy the meal. As the endless courses begin to arrive, the overseas scholars take turns returning toasts, thanking their hosts for the honor and reciprocating compliments. When it comes to Tianlei's turn to speak, he, having drunk a lot, rises light-headedly and mumbles some words. Emptying the glass, he slouches in his chair. After a long while fruits are brought to the tables. He gulps down two huge slices of watermelon and begins to feel relaxed.

Following the meal, the party adjourns to the reception room and starts discussing the dates for visiting Jinmen. Sobering up, Tianlei asks Yuan, who sits next to him, "Were

they talking about visiting Jinmen just now?"

"Mr. Wu announced the plan during the meal. Didn't you hear? Why? Aren't you planning on going? You said earlier it was a great idea."

When Tianlei returns home, he finds the Chens in the living room visiting with his parents. Because he has drunk a lot and was cooled by a gentle breeze in the taxi, the warm air in the house feels suffocating, though the windows to the garden are open and a fan is blowing. Suddenly he feels sick in the stomach and rushes to the kitchen, vomiting all the food and wine into the sink, along with all the compliments he received in the evening. Everyone in the living room follows him into the kitchen, where his mother, patting him on the back, asks him what is wrong.

Yishan pours a cup of water from a pitcher for Tianlei to rinse his mouth and asks Ah-cui, who is eating watermelon while relaxing in the backyard, to get Tianlei a wet towel. His mother then sends Ah-cui to buy some heat stroke pills, and his father, standing aside, complains that Tianlei must have had too much to drink and needs to eat something to counter the alcohol. Tianlei, better after throwing up, feels guilty when he sees everyone hustling about for him.

"I'm all right now," says Tianlei to Yishan's parents. "I met an old friend at the banquet and was very excited, so I drank a little more than I should have. Dad, why don't you all go back and sit down? You, too, Mom. Where's Ah-cui?"

Could you ask her to come and clean up? I'll go and change. I'll be out in a minute."

A calmness comes to Tianlei once he is back in his small room where no one flatters, mocks, or worries about him. Taking off his shirt, T-shirt, and pants, he drops them on the floor and lies on his bed, the summer mat warm like a bathtub just after the hot water has been drained, and it sticks to his skin. He remembers the expression on Mrs. Yuan's face when she complained about the heat, Xinhuang Yuan and his achievements, and the self-assured air of the others at the party. One has to have a good career to possess that air of confidence. All guests at the banquet except himself were professors of mathematics, physics, or various fields of engineering, and they were treated with the utmost courtesy. Those people, the so-called "pillars of the nation"! All they talked about was status and the rank of their colleagues who couldn't return to Taiwan to teach: who got a promotion and was teaching at which famous school, who became a department chairman and brought glory to the Chinese, and who published an impressive paper early in his career. The two chubby Mo brothers sat at Tianlei's table, their proudly glowing faces making them especially conspicuous as everyone complimented them on their huge success. The older brother is in his early thirties and teaches physics at Harvard; the younger one, still under thirty, has secured a position as assistant professor of aviation at MIT. Tianlei had heard of the Mo

brothers even when he was in the United States, and now sitting with them at the same table, he wasn't sure if he should consider meeting them an honor or foul luck.

"Mr. Moe, I'd like to know your opinion about contemporary Taiwanese literature," the older Mo said to Tianlei when he found out that Tianlei was in liberal arts. "Literature is not my field, but I do very much enjoy reading. In the two weeks that I've been back, I've found current Taiwanese novels very distasteful. Most of what's sold at bookstands on the streets is about sex, kung fu, or hopeless romance. Have you read any of that?"

"No, I don't have the time."

Seeing that Tianlei wasn't as anxious to echo his views as the rest, he appeared a little disappointed. "Oh, in that case, could you recommend a couple of books to me that you think are worth reading?"

"I really haven't read much. I spend most of my time trying to make a living. People like you probably wouldn't know how hard it is for a liberal arts major to survive in the U.S. Well, one magazine that I did like was put out by some Chinese students. Their essays gave me what they call 'food for thought.'"

"I've looked at that magazine, too," says the younger Mo in a disdainful tone. "I thought it was neither Western nor Chinese. I had no idea what points they were trying to make. You actually liked it?"

"I personally think those writers are the hope for our generation. They are not just writing stories; they are recreating our lives, the lives of Chinese people in America, their difficulties and predicaments." Having said so, he noticed the distorted expressions on the Mo brothers' faces, and quickly added, "Of course, I majored in journalism, so I'm not an authority on literature, either. You two aren't only scientific experts but are also so knowledgeable in literature. It is indeed admirable."

Everyone at the table nodded in agreement and toasted the Mo brothers once again.

Recalling the episode, Tianlei wants to laugh. It also reminds him of what a literary critic once said at a party: "Those who simply enjoy the stories in the New Yorker cannot be called smart; the smart ones are those who can understand the cartoons!" What he said about the Mo brothers was meant as sarcasm but received as a compliment.

Yishan stands by his door and asks how he is feeling. Jumping up from his bed and covering himself with the mosquito netting, he tells her he is coming out in a moment. When the figure in the doorway leaves, he gets dressed and comes to the living room.

Ah-cui brings him watermelon and everyone asks how he is. His mother touches him on the forehead and, not feeling a temperature, allows him to sit close to the fan. Yishan sits

across from him, her hair in a pigtail, revealing the delicate skin around her neck. She has on a low-cut white silk blouse, a blue pleated skirt fastened by a wide belt, and a pair of white Italian dress shoes. Her makeup is light today, her eyelashes painted blue, making her look especially young and pretty. Such an attractive girl! She would instantly be his if only he would ask.

"Yishan, they've scheduled a tour of Jinmen for us," he says in excitement. "Would you like to go with me?"

This invitation means to Yishan that Tianlei can no longer stand to be away from her and that he is now ready to make their relationship public. Smiling, her thin lips perked upward, she says, "Of course, I'd love to! Are you really going to take me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Isn't that a bit far away?" says Tianlei's mother. "It's dangerous running around all day long. Tianlei, you can just tell them you don't feel well, and you two can go somewhere else. There are plenty of places close by that you can go and still have a good time. Why go that far?"

Nodding, Yishan's mother adds, "Your mother is right. There's a beach resort that's just opened in Jinshan. It's really pretty out there. You two might want to go there instead."

"Mom, I want to see Jinmen," says Yishan. "Remember the last time I had a chance to go there and you wouldn't let me



go because you said you were worried about me? Now Tianlei is going to take me there. What are you afraid of?"

Seeing that Yishan trusts him so completely, even more than he has trusted himself over the years, he says, "The group is going on a chartered plane. It'll be safe. And since everyone else is going, I don't think I should cop out. Besides, I've heard a lot about Jinmen, so I want to go there once."

Knowing that her son has made up his mind, Tianlei's mother no longer objects. Everyone starts asking him about the banquet--who was invited and who gave speeches. All of them, including Yishan, are interested in every detail, so he tells them about the banquet, including his running into Xinhuang Yuan.

"See, if you took my advice that year and switched to engineering," says Tianlei's father, "you would have been invited back to teach, too. That would have saved you the cost of the trip and made us more proud. Wouldn't you agree, Mr. Chen?"

"Well, successful scholars can come from any field," says Yishan's father. "Tianlei is still young. In a couple of years he'll be better-known. At that time he will be invited back."

Tianlei remains silent. Becoming well-known in a couple of years? Even if he did, what difference would it make? Seeing the look on her son's face, Tianlei's mother changes

the topic. "Is Xinhuang married now? Is his wife also from Taiwan University?"

"No, she's not. She's the daughter of a general from the Sino-Japanese war, but she grew up in the U.S."

"I know which officer you're talking about," says Tianlei's father. He then begins telling Yishan's parents about the man and his exploits.

The Chens stayed until after midnight.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tianlei's first impression of Jinmen is that it is clean and orderly, its tranquility a sharp contrast to the bustle of Taipei. The minute their chartered military aircraft lands, a man in an army uniform walks up to the ramp. After the group emerges from the plane, he shakes hands with Professor Wei, the group leader, who then introduces everyone to the officer before everybody boards a big military bus for the army base. Although the ride is short, Tianlei can already see how much cleaner the streets are than in Taipei and how many fewer people there are here. After winding down several scenic streets, their bus stops at a tunnel entry and the officer leads them into the tunnel, where the group spends the rest of the morning. Upon entering, Tianlei feels strange; it reminds him of the subways in New York, but soon he becomes used to it. The group is shown the offices on the mountains and the place where the soldiers sleep. The entire place actually evokes a sense of peace. At a fort the officer shows them a cannon and explains its functions. The silent group is then led outside the mountain to a fortified watch tower, and the officer, pointing in the distance to the land beyond the sea, says, "That's Xiamen over there."

Standing on the fortress, Tianlei gazes at the town in the distance--Xiamen, a part of the mainland, a place that many in Taiwan want to visit but do not dare. After so many lonely

years abroad, home, for Tianlei, is no longer a concrete idea; it has become a dreamland which fills his heart with sorrow and longing whenever he thinks about it. He recalls the dull but peaceful scenes of his hometown before the war: the small shops along the dirt roads, the jars on the tall counters filled with olives, rock candy, ginger-flavored candy, and sticky bars, his hungry eyes watching the shopkeeper puffing his pipe behind the counter and gazing at the sunset. He recalls the bombed-out houses, the damp air raid shelters, the mothers' screaming, and the sullen looks as people retreated from their hometown; the cities he retreated through--crowded Chongqing, desolate Baoji, Tongguan, and Luoyang; the horse-drawn cart packed with scores of people, moving on the dusty roads along the roaring Yellow River. Each time he recalls those days, nostalgia comes upon him. Even the barren Northwest and the night he once spent under a restaurant table in Nanjing become dear to him.

He looks into the blue sky, the sky shared by all, capitalists, communists, people of all races and in every corner of the world. Standing on the outpost, he realizes that the waters stretched below him connect all his countrymen, the Taiwanese and those living on the mainland, who later were termed "enemies." Staring across the sea, he wonders what the folks he once knew on the mainland must be doing now. Are they as confused as he is?

"Tianlei, take a look in this," says Xinhuang Yuan, turning

the telescope in his direction. "You can see people walking on the streets through this."

"I don't really want to," he says after a brief hesitation, then turns away from the place where he once belonged.

"Can I have a look in that, Mr. Yuan?" says Yishan as Tianlei walks back to the tunnel.

Everyone is silent as the group leaves the watch tower. Even the talkative Mo brothers have quieted. Walking up to Tianlei, Yishan pulls his shirt sleeve.

"What's the matter with everyone?"

"What are you referring to?" Tianlei asks, staring at her.

"Why is everybody so quiet? They were so excited before."

Scanning the group, he says, "You wouldn't understand."

Yishan is unhappy with Tianlei's answer but tries not to show it on her face. "You always act so sophisticated, as if you were much older than me. Actually you are not."

Unable to help himself, he smiles. "But you've lived in Taiwan all your life."

"What does that have to do with age?"

"For every year that you spend in the U.S., you grow ten years older."

"Well, if that's the case, you really should take me there because you've always considered me a child."

"If I go, of course I will."

"What? Are you implying. . .?"

As they reach a tunnel, the officer hurries to the top of

the steps. "Gentlemen," he shouts to the visitors below. "This is a newly opened tunnel. We're planning to build a big auditorium inside that'll hold thousands of people, and over there," he points to his right, "we'll build a stage. After the project is completed, which we expect to take another six months, we'll be able to invite opera troupes over to perform for our soldiers."

Voices of praise from the visitors echo in the tunnel. Through a damp but unusually clean passage, the group is led into a huge, noisy cave with stone walls, which serves as the soldiers' dining hall. Almost all the tables, seven or eight of them, are occupied by soldiers in green uniforms as well as by some foreign tourists. The place reminds Tianlei of restaurants in Taipei.

The officer introduces the group to two other officers, then says good-bye. Everyone thanks him and follows the new guides to the two remaining tables. After brief introductions, their meal begins, and they start asking questions about Jinmen: how many soldiers are stationed here, the soldiers' work, and their recreational activities and vacations. The officers answer so readily that it is apparent they have been asked the same questions countless times. A Professor Cheng at Tianlei's table says something to the officer next to him and the officer, turning to him, replies, "Yes, we have those here, too. If you're interested, I can take you there to have a look."

Not hearing the question, Tianlei isn't sure what the officer was referring to, but judging from the look on the man's face, he can guess the content. As the group moves to the sitting area after the meal, some light cigarettes while others rest. As a waiter cleans their tables and puts out new plates and chopsticks, another group of tourists, several foreigners among them, enters. The officers greet them and start the introduction again. Tianlei is surprised at the level of fluency with which the officers answer the foreign visitors' questions in English.

"Are there a lot of people that visit here each day?" Tianlei asks an officer sitting nearby.

"Usually about the same as today. Sometimes we can have over ten tables full of guests; other times four or five tables."

"It's not an easy job to receive so many tourists every day," says Tianlei, sticking his tongue out in amazement.

"I think working here as a guide is pretty good. They get to meet all kinds of people," says the older Mo, who has been talking excitedly with Yishan.

Another officer now comes to show the group other places. Their first destination is the Officers' Palace. Tianlei knows what kind of place that is, and since Yishan is the only woman in the group, he wants to ask her to skip that part of the tour but doesn't know how to. The rooms in the "palace" are similar to those in a regular soldiers' dormitory, each

one having a desk and a bed with a clean, folded quilt on top, except that a young woman is found in each room. After visiting several such rooms, even the neatly dressed women standing before the beds seem monotonous. As they leave, Yishan, out of curiosity, asks Tianlei, "What are those women there for?"

"Didn't you figure that out?" interrupts the older Mo. "This is a palace for officers."

Yishan blushes, and Mo smiles. The group now comes to the soldiers' library. The tables lining the sides of the room display faded letters and documents, and the glass cabinet in the center contains many maps along with explanations. In the open space outside the library, everyone takes pictures, some of the entire group, some with the officers, and some only of themselves. Yishan wants to have a picture with Tianlei, but seeing his absent-mindedness, decides not to make the suggestion. Afterwards the group, following the officer's directions, writes slogans and attaches them to a multicolored balloon, letting the balloon fly toward the mainland. Raising his head to look at the blue sky, Tianlei thinks of an aunt who used to live in Wenzhou. She was childless and treated Tianlei as her own son. After so many years, would she still be living in the same house? Would she be able to see the balloon they have just sent up and know that it came from a nephew who misses her deeply? Although Tianlei doesn't know how his aunt looks now, he cannot forget the nights when she



sat by his bed fanning away the mosquitoes. Would she have thought that the boy she cared so much for would later go overseas and spend ten of his best years in a strange land?"

"Tianlei, time to move," someone says. "We're going shopping."

"Shopping? Are there stores here?"

"Of course. Let's go."

Seeing the older Mo walking with Yishan in front of him and remembering that the man had sat next to Yishan at the lunch table, whispering to her and constantly staring into her eyes, Tianlei now realizes that the fellow is after her. Out of anger and jealousy, particularly goaded by Mo's total disregard of his presence, Tianlei walks up to Yishan and takes her hand.

"I see the two of you are having a good chat," says Tianlei, glancing at Mo.

"Oh, I was telling Yishan about Boston."

"Mr. Mo is a professor at Harvard University. Did you know that, Tianlei?"

"Well, right now I'm only an assistant professor," says Mo. "But I just got my Ph.D. not too long ago. You can call me Dawei."

Tilting her head and raising her eyebrows, she asks Mo with a naughty smile, "Are there lots of Chinese girls over there?"

"Yes, quite a few, but none of them is as pretty as you are."

No longer able to stand Mo's insolence, Tianlei says, "Thank you very much for giving my fiancée such high compliments." Pulling Yishan a couple of steps ahead, he adds, "We're sorry to leave you alone, but we need to go in that store to get some Jinmen wine for our families. Have a good day, Mr. Mo."

The narrow streets are lined with many shops and full of customers, some of them soldiers, others tourists. All the stores seem to sell similar items: wines, salted fish, rice, flour, and Jinmen specialties. The scorching sun beats down on people. The children's heads are bare, their shaven skulls oily from the intense heat. A shopkeeper in shorts is haggling with a customer while soliciting passers-by. "Please come in," she says with a big smile, although there is hardly any room left in the store.

The cool sensation in the tunnels has now completely dispersed, and the intense heat makes one fidgety. Annoyed by the weather and Tianlei's unexpected domineering attitude, Yishan has fallen into complete silence. Tianlei, also tired and in a rotten mood, asks her, "Aren't you going to buy something here?"

"I never said I was going to buy anything."

"Do you want to get some sorghum wine for your dad?"

"My father doesn't drink domestic wine," Yishan says, intentionally provoking Tianlei.

"Oh, is that so? I'd like to get a couple of bottles for

my dad. He's not so westernized."

"Is there anything wrong with being westernized?"

"I didn't say there was," says Tianlei, handing some bills to the shopkeeper while waiting for the bottles to be wrapped. "But the sad thing is the westernized father has trained her daughter to be so westernized that she is blindly admiring a pseudo-foreigner who teaches in a well-known foreign school."

As they leave the store and stand in the brutal sun, the two stare at each other for a moment. Here they are, one a Ph.D. who has experienced all the sufferings of a foreign student, the other a recent college graduate who has never encountered hardships in life and is striving toward the path which Tianlei has gone through.

"I'm not talking to you again," says Yishan in an angry tone, her eyes moist. "You have hardly spoken to me all day long, and when somebody else comes to talk to me, you start insulting him. That's ridiculous. Only a wimp envies others' success. Think about what I just said and you'll know who's been unreasonable." She turns and walks back. Tianlei's eyes follow her.

On the return flight, Yishan deliberately chooses a seat next to the older Mo. Yuan's wife is chatting with another lady, and Yuan comes to sit with Tianlei. Tired and embittered by the lecture from Yishan, he sets his seat as far back as it can go and slouches in it, his eyes closed. When Yuan talks to him, he pretends he cannot hear because of

the noise of the motors. After the plane is high in the air, Yuan elbows him and hands him a slip of paper, which reads, "You didn't tell me the last time we met that you had a girlfriend in Taiwan. Is she the one? She looks gorgeous!"

Tianlei forces a smile and nods, and Yuan hands him another slip of paper: "You've got to be careful! Some people may say they are back to teach, but actually they are here to lure girls. You've got to watch out for those that try to take away what belongs to you!"

Smiling wryly, Tianlei writes at the bottom, "People act any way they want to."

Shaking his head, Yuan says, "That's a fatalistic argument. Haven't you lived ten years in the U.S.?" As Yuan pouts his lips in Yishan's direction, Tianlei looks that way and sees Yishan and Mo exchanging notes, too. As Mo busily writes, Yishan smiles. Seeing her excited looks, Tianlei adds to the slip, "Some people not only have learned Americans' efficiency; they are actually better at it. What can I do?"

"I'm going to warn that Mo guy. We all came back to teach, so we should respect one another."

Smiling self-mockingly, Tianlei writes, "You're mistaken. I'm not here to teach."

"Oh, that's right. I'm sorry. I forgot you came to get married," Yuan writes and starts chuckling, the sound of his laughter lost in the roar of the motors.

When the plane arrives at the Taipei airport, several cars

are already waiting there to take the group to the Army Club. There, in the Hall of Heroes, the professors are warmly greeted and treated to another banquet, at which compliments are once again exchanged. After the meal, the guests are exhausted, and since the hosts are scheduled to receive several more groups that day, they say good-bye to the scholars and offer to take them home. Not wanting to trouble their hosts further, the professors graciously decline the offer and each takes a taxi to his own residence.

Without a word, Yishan follows Tianlei. Although angry inside, Tianlei feels obligated--perhaps as a result of his foreign education--to speak with her; after all, she has been his guest. Slowing his steps, he turns and says, "It's still early. Would you like to go somewhere?"

"No," she replies. "I am tired. Please take me home."

Having no choice, he stops a taxi and accompanies her home. At the entrance to her house, Yishan, without inviting Tianlei to come inside as she has done on previous occasions, simply says good-bye and takes out her keys to open the gate. After she goes in, Tianlei stands stunned for a while under the branches of the Cape jasmine in the yard before he goes home. If the relationship between them has to end this way, he thinks to himself, there isn't much to regret, except that it is hard to swallow the fact of seeing Yishan taken away by this Mo so effortlessly. Yes, Mo did graduate from Yale and is teaching mathematics at Harvard, but are those enough

reasons for Yishan to fall for him? Aren't there other things she should look for in a man besides his status? If all she wants is these superficial things, hell, let her go. Then nobody will have any further obligation in this arranged match.

Tired and thirsty, he goes into a snack bar and orders a slice of watermelon. As he eats, he recalls the last time when he and Yishan came here: she sat facing him, and he watched her as she ate her watermelon in small bites, afraid to let any juice drip down her chin. When she finished, she wiped her delicate mouth gently with a tiny handkerchief and smiled sweetly at him. She was indeed lovely and pretty. What he didn't like about her, and still doesn't, is her blind worship of the West and her overwhelming naivete.

He pays the bill and goes home. In the living room his parents sit quietly with the lights off, the only thread of light coming from a street light outside the yard, the only audible sound from the fan. The scene reminds him of the incessant and tearless groans of the idiot Benjamin in Faulkner's Sound and the Fury.

"Dad, Mom, I'm back," says Tianlei. "Why don't you turn on the lights?"

"It's cooler this way," his mother says in a somewhat cold tone.

His father stands up and snaps the light on, and Tianlei covers his face with a hand. "How could you invite Yishan on

the trip and then leave her alone?" his father begins. "What happened to the manners you had before you went abroad? You have no respect for other people's feelings anymore. Why? Because you think you are a success now? You're already over thirty, but you don't even know how to treat people properly! You've only been back for less than a month and have already caused me so much embarrassment."

The hot air in the room, the heat from the lamp, and his father's scolding make Tianlei sweat, and soon his shirt is soaked.

"What has happened, Mom?" Tianlei asks, turning away from his father.

"You look so hot, Tianlei. Why don't you take off your shirt?" his mother says, pushing the fan closer to him and setting it to blow directly on him. "Since you know Yishan is the only child in her family and she has had her own way all her life, you should have yielded to her a little more."

"Defong, that's beside the point," says Tianlei's father. "It's our son who knowingly mistreated their daughter, and that's why she cried to her parents. What does that have to do with her being an only child?"

"You're being unreasonable, Chengmin. Every argument has two sides. You haven't even listened to Tianlei's side of the story. How can you be so sure it was all his fault?" Having stopped her husband this way, she continues, "Tianlei, I know you didn't intend to hurt Yishan's feelings. But you

see, she is so young and pretty, so she likes to be pampered by others. She thought you had slighted her on purpose, and I'm sure she was also exhausted from the trip, so when she went home she complained and cried to her parents. Mr. Chen called a short while ago and sounded a little displeased with the way you treated Yishan. He said maybe you were a little arrogant, but I know that's not how you are. I think the best way to resolve the situation is to go to her house first thing in the morning and apologize to her. Take her out and spend the day with her. Then things will be back to normal again."

Angry and perplexed, he takes off his shirt and, without saying a word, goes to the bathroom to freshen up. What kind of logic is that, he thinks to himself. She was the one who flirted with somebody else and now she is accusing me of slighting her. Isn't that ridiculous? There is no way I'm going to apologize to her. What for? What did I do wrong? If she's unhappy, it serves her right! Go ahead and marry that piggish-looking mathematician.

"Tianlei, come and have some mung bean soup. It'll help cool you down," his mother says.

"Why don't you stay here for a while, too, Mom? Your room must be hot after a day like this."

Turning off the light, his mother sits next to him as he eats the soup slowly. In the dark, he cannot see his father's face clearly but can hear him puffing on his pipe. He must still be angry. What have I done to cause embarrassment to



him, Tianlei asks himself. Why is "face" so important in everything? Shouldn't a person's own feelings matter? Why should I try to please someone else when I'm not happy myself? If two people have no similar interests, how can a strong relationship be built simply by one person trying to please the other?

"Mom, I'm going to Tainan tomorrow to see Tianmei. Before she left, I promised her I would."

His mother does not respond. The only sounds in the room come from the fan and his father's pipe. Why should I care so much, he thinks. I'm just here for a visit, and I can return to the U.S. anytime. Although life there may be somewhat cold-hearted, it has its advantages, too: people don't care so much about "face," and relationships--no matter if they are between lovers, friends, or relatives--are often based on greenbacks, and that makes things a lot simpler. America indeed has numerous good points. For example, if a boy doesn't entertain his date well when he takes her out, at the most she'll refuse to go out with him again. She wouldn't complain about such things to her parents and let them tell everything to your parents. God only knows how a person's affairs with his girlfriend have anything to do with his father's "face." Forget it. Let it all go to hell.

After a long pause, his mother says, "All right, I have no objection to your going to Tainan, but be sure to take Yishan along. Remember you asked me to find out how her family views

your relationship with her? They are in favor of it, and they think you should spend more time with her." Then in a softer voice, as if to console him, she adds, "I know you'll do the right thing this time."

Holding the empty bowl in his hands, his mouth wide open, he wonders whether he has indeed asked his mother to speak to Yishan's family about his relationship with her.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tianlei does not remember having ever seen the train called Tourister before, but its clean condition and its brightness make him happy, as if he has received an unexpected gift in the mail. The only imperfection comes from the annoying stiffness of the woman announcer's voice as she describes points of interest in standard Mandarin through the loudspeakers. Since Yishan says she cannot sit next to the window because it would give her a headache, Tianlei takes the window seat and pours two cups of tea.

After the train passes the Wanhua area they see rice paddies, harvested wheat fields, trees, utility poles, and occasional cattle and sheep on beautiful grassland. Tianlei remembers the train he used to take from Berkeley to go to Chicago: the stout black ladies with thick lips, most of them cleaning ladies for rich people in the Lake Forest and Wilmette areas north of Chicago; the liquor-smelling, hairy Puerto Ricans; Jewish passengers with cigarettes in their mouths, reading detective novels; and of course other Americans, most of them housewives from middle-income families, heading for fashion sales on Michigan Avenue. There were also Orientals, like himself, who were either Japanese, Korean, or Chinese. The train passed behind some tall office buildings, warehouses, and shabby-looking apartment buildings, the windows facing the tracks dusty, the back porches--where

women's underwear, bras, and babies' diapers were hung--piled with old carpets, broken tables, and beds. Scraps of paper littered the ground. As the train passed, the buildings shook. Perhaps someday the city housing authority would decide to tear them down and erect new, modern apartment complexes there.

When the train neared downtown it went underground, and all Tianlei could see was advertisements on tunnel walls: See the Kim Sisters from South Korea perform at Palmer House; the Rolling Stones come to Malcolm Theater; see Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf at Dark Brick Theater; guaranteed hair-growing medicine on sale. . . . At the Monroe station, where profanity was painted on the wall, he got off the subway and followed the crowd up the escalator. Facing him was the most glamorous street in Chicago: State Street.

"Hey, you're back to that old problem again," says Yishan, tapping him.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Tianlei smiles. "I haven't taken a train in such long time I was totally engrossed by the wide open space and the green fields."

To make his mother happy and not to cause further embarrassment to his father, Tianlei went to Yishan's home the morning before to apologize and explained to her that he had never meant to leave her alone; he had simply "fallen into deep thoughts" again, as he frequently did. Yishan accepted his apology and the two went out for a meal and later to a

movie, thus ending the dispute.

"Are you hungry?" Tianlei asks her. "I hope there is some place on this train where we can find something to eat."

"Of course there is," says Yishan, throwing her hair back. "And a very good one, too. You want to go take a look?"

The dining car is clean and well decorated. On each table there is a green gooseneck vase filled with bright red flowers. The yellow ruffles on the white curtains sway with elegant music. A waiter hands them menus--printed in Chinese and English. There are sandwiches, curried rice, and fried rice with eggs. Tianlei whistles in surprise.

"How westernized!"

"There you go again," Yishan says, glancing at him.

"I wasn't talking about you," he hurries to explain. "What would you like?"

"I'm not really hungry," she says. "I'll have some coffee."

With a light Scotch in his hand, Tianlei shakes the ice cubes in the glass, his eyes on the fields outside and a mountain range in the distance. The peace of mind he now feels isn't because he has become reconciled with Yishan; rather it is because he has returned to surroundings that used to be familiar to him: the bamboo forests, thatched cottages, creeks, cattle and sheep. It is also because he has gotten away from the noise of Taipei and into an environment which he hoped for at the start of the trip; and because he may soon

see his sister Tianmei and her husband, perhaps even Meili. Of course he is also happy that Yishan is with him. He begins to tell her about the places he has been in the United States: the waterfalls on the West Coast, the snow-clad Midwest, the spectacular colored lights on Niagara Falls in the East, and the small, quiet lakes in the Southwest. As she listens, Yishan's face shows an expression of admiration, her eyes a look of longing, making her seem all the more awe-stricken. "I'll take you to all those places," Tianlei adds.

Yishan smiles, like a child, the corners of her eyes lowering, mouth corners rising. "You mean it? Make sure you do that!"

Smiling, he leans across the table to kiss her cheek. She looks around, one hand on her blushing face, and says, "And you called me westernized!"

Finishing his wine, Tianlei says, "You're such a nice girl. I couldn't help it."

"Me a nice girl? We just had a fight, and you think I'm nice?"

"I wasn't referring to your personality. What I meant was you looked cute. I couldn't think of an exact word, so I used 'nice.'"

They sit there and talk until lunch time. Tianlei orders fried rice with eggs, and Yishan a ham sandwich and a strawberry ice cream. After the meal they return to their seats. The sun, sneaking in on Yishan's face from the edge

of the shade, along with patterned sounds of the train and a gentle breeze from the fans, causes her to fall asleep gradually while talking with Tianlei. Not wanting to disturb her, Tianlei leafs through a magazine, his heart peaceful for the first time since his return. He remembers what his friend Pingtian Zhang once said to him: One has to look at things from different angles. It is perhaps true that Yishan is a little stubborn and vain, Tianlei thinks to himself, but was I any different when I was her age? Although I may no longer recall specifically how I felt then, I must have been equally stubborn, if not worse; otherwise, why would I have gone overseas right after graduation? Looking back, he realizes that it may be unreasonable to blame Yishan for her keen desire to go to the United States. With his head cocked to one side, he observes her countenance, her upper lip lightly touching the lower one, her face attractive even when she is asleep. Tianlei admits that Yishan is pretty, and one of the reasons he is still single is that he never had a chance to get acquainted with a good-looking girl while he was in the U.S.

The day is still bright when they arrive in Tainan. Tianlei taps Yishan to wake her up, and Yishan, opening her eyes, says sleepily, "Did I doze off?"

"Did you doze off? I don't know how you could just leave me all alone and go to sleep."

"It's all because of you," says Yishan, smiling. "You

started the fight between us and that made me lose a whole night's sleep." She stands up and straightens her green, striped dress, combing the side of her hair behind her ears, letting a small curled tuft of hair hang on her forehead. "How does my hair look?" she asks.

"It couldn't be better," replies Tianlei, taking their two suitcases and bag off the luggage rack.

Before they get off the train Tianlei already sees his sister, her daughter and her husband. Tianmei has sent him pictures of her family, including her wedding picture, but Dingya looks shorter than he did in the photographs. Perhaps because he has gained some weight, he looks about the same height as Tianmei, who is a head shorter than Tianlei himself. Dingya's face is round and he wears a pair of owl-like glasses and a colorful polo shirt, making him look like a vendor. Because he is far away, Tianlei cannot tell if he is bald. Since he cannot imagine how Dingya looked when he was a student, Tianlei is a little puzzled why his sister married him. When they were in school Tianlei occasionally overheard his sister talking with her close friends like Jiali's sister about her criteria for an ideal husband: the man had to be tall and handsome, graceful, and cool. He wonders why she chose someone who doesn't possess any of those qualities.

The minute they step down from the train, Tianmei and her husband walk up to them. Tianlei and Dingya shake hands before Tianmei has a chance to introduce them. Dingya, with



a heavy Northern accent, says, "It's indeed an honor to meet you. Tianmei talks about you all the time. So, I suppose your ten years abroad must have been an enriching experience. Am I right?"

A little taken aback by the bluntness of Dingya's words, Tianlei turns to look at his sister, who is talking with Yishan. "It's been fine," Tianlei replies. "I feel bad about your taking time off from work to come and meet us. Oh, let me introduce you two. This is Miss Yishan Chen, and this is my brother-in-law Dingya Wang."

To the surprise of both Tianlei and Dingya, Yishan holds out her hand. "Thank you for coming, Mr. Wang." Then, squatting and holding the little girl's hand, she says, "Xiao-rong, do you still remember me? I've brought treats for you."

"Really?" says the little girl. "Where are they?"

"Xiao-rong, is that the way to behave?" Turning to her brother, Tianmei says, "Shall we go? It's so hot here."

Outside the train station Dingya drives over with a 1958 Ford station wagon. After loading the luggage in the back, he says with a proud air, "This is our director's company car. He doesn't use it very often, so he lets me have it any time I want to. They treat me really well."

The sugar factory where Dingya works is located in a suburb of Tainan called Zhuzidian, twenty minutes from the train station. On the way to the factory Tianlei sees rice paddies, houses surrounded by bamboo trees, and fruit stands along the

road, the dust raised by the car settling on the bananas, sugar cane, and litchi. A big flock of chickens rove the road, opening their wings and scurrying to the sides only when the car draws near. By the stands, bare-chested men in straw hats cast glances of curiosity at the station wagon as it speeds by, their eyes following until it disappears into the distance.

Upon entering the factory, Tianlei is impressed by the sight in front of him: along a wide road lined with palm trees are workers' dormitories in the distance, a tall chimney emitting a thick, white smoke, the trees casting their shadows onto the ground. The surroundings give Tianlei a sense of seclusion and tranquility; even the sunshine seems milder.

"What a nice place to live!" exclaims Tianlei. "You can't find a better one. Isn't it so, Tianmei?"

"Well, when I first came, I thought it was too quiet, but I've gotten used to it. When I go to Taipei now I can hardly stand all the noise there."

"It's so far from here to Tainan. Do you get bored?" asks Yishan. "Do you go in town to see movies once in a while?"

"Not real often," Tianmei replies. "After I take care of Xiao-rong during the day, I get tired in the evening and don't feel like going anywhere."

"Those movies probably aren't worth seeing anyway," says Dingya. "The actors and actresses seem so affected in their speech and motion that each time I go, I catch a cold."

"Catch a cold?" Tianlei stares at him with a puzzled look.

"Yes, because every time I go to a movie I get so nauseated that my pores all open up, and when I go outside I catch a cold."

Tianlei and Yishan both laugh, and Tianmei, throwing a dirty look at her husband, says, "You simply aren't interested in movies, so you make up funny excuses like that."

The car stops in front of their house. The house, Japanese in style, is bigger than most homes. A flagstone path leads to the front door, the two maple trees along the way forming a sharp contrast to the potted banana tree on the doorstep. A neatly dressed middle-age woman emerges from behind a glass door and places several pairs of slippers on the top step. Through the entrance they go into the living room, where there are two wicker chairs, a couch, and a tea table, and on the wall a landscape painting and a couplet on a scroll. There are several chairs on the back porch, which faces a yard full of trees and flowers. Dingya asks Tianlei to sit down while Tianmei takes Yishan to the bathroom to freshen up. The maid brings pineapple juice made at the factory where Dingya works, and Tianlei, having tasted the juice in Taipei and thinking it was too sweet, asks for some tea.

"I really think this is an ideal place to live," Tianlei remarks. "The surroundings are very pleasant."

"You think so?" says Dingya. "It's quite rural here, so it's not easy to get to places. When Tianmei first mentioned

that you might come, I was worried that you might find it boring here since you're used to all the conveniences that only the most industrialized country in the world can offer."

Not knowing if the words are meant as a compliment or sarcasm, Tianlei says, "I'm not sure if that's true. Both Tianmei and I grew up in the country, so we've led simple lives. It's true they have machines for everything in the U.S., but often things can be more easily done by hand. For one thing, you have a housekeeper here. When I was in the U.S. I prepared all the meals myself. And I see you also have things like a refrigerator and a car. Life over there is the same."

"Well, we do have access to those things, but they don't belong to us."

"But our living standards have been improved," says Tianmei. "We have electricity and running water in all the rural areas now."

"And you have a flush toilet, too," adds Tianlei. "That's another thing that people didn't have before."

"Occasionally there is a power failure," says Dingya. "I remember once a typhoon cut off our power for three days, and everything in the fridge got spoiled. We had to eat by candlelight. It was so dark everywhere. A strong wind was pushing hard on the windows and blowing tree branches against the door. It got a little scary."

Dingya's words remind Tianlei of a typhoon he encountered

in Taipei many years ago. A fierce wind started as he was going home from school. The bottom of his raincoat got stuck in the rear wheel of his bicycle. He got off his bike and took off the raincoat. As he was about to pull the stuck part out from the wheel a gust of wind hit him, blowing him and his bike to the ground and his books into the ditch. He sat up on the road, watching leaves and rubbish circling in the air, stupefied. Although it was daytime, the entire sky grew dark. He forgot his pain and, for the first time in his life, perceived beauty in a violent storm. Hearing what Dingya has just described, Tianlei wonders if he felt the same way. "That night must have been quite poetic, I assume?"

Glancing at Tianlei and pushing up his glasses, Dingya starts laughing. "You and your sister are so much alike," he says. "Tianmei also likes to talk about poetry and that sort of stuff, but not very much about reality."

"What kind of reality are you guys talking about?" asks Yishan, who has returned from washing her face.

"Oh, Dingya said my sister and I resemble each other."

"I don't think so," says Yishan. "Tianmei has a round face but yours is long."

"He wasn't talking about appearance."

Xiao-rong, a box of chocolate in her hands, walks up to Tianlei. "Uncle Moe, take one."

"No, thank you. You're such a nice girl. You shouldn't eat too much candy. It's not good for your teeth." As

Tianlei follows his sister to the washroom, she asks him, "So, what do you think of Dingya?"

He cannot say he dislikes the man, although neither the man's looks nor his manners impress him. Dingya appears so experienced and balanced that he gives the impression of worldliness. "He's all right," Tianlei says. "I bet you he must have a pretty good temper." Then half-jokingly, he adds, "Didn't you once say you were going to look for a real sharp-looking guy?"

"You don't think he is like that at all?" Tianmei asks, gazing at her brother.

"A real sharp-looking guy might be good for a lover," says Tianmei, "but for a husband, somebody down-to-earth, like Dingya, would be a better choice. Actually, nothing is more important than finding someone with whom you can be happy."

"Sometimes I am happy, but sometimes not."

"Of course, besides happiness you also need to trust him and have confidence in him. If you do, and if he doesn't make you tense or uneasy, that's already a pretty good relationship. I think you do trust and rely on him quite a bit, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you've got it made. You can't expect him to be everything you want, and neither can you be perfect for him. Right?"

"You are an expert when it comes to giving advice to

others," says Tianmei with a smile, glancing sideways at her brother. "By the way, I see that you and Yishan have gotten a lot closer. Do you like her better now?"

"You could say that, or you could say I've adjusted my expectations. Well, I guess she's all right." He lowers his head to wash his face and neck and after rinsing wipes with a towel Tianmei hands him. "That sure felt good," he says, letting out a deep breath. "Do we have anything to eat?"

"Certainly!" Tianmei says. "We're going out to a club to eat right now. Dingya already made the arrangements. That's also where you're going to stay at night because we don't have enough bedrooms. You don't mind being separated from her at night, do you?"

"Oh yes, I do!" Tianlei says jokingly, pretending to wring his sister's neck. "What kind of a hostess are you?"

After chatting more in the living room, the four are on their way to the club, leaving Xiao-rong at home to be watched by the maid. The sun has set and the moon is gently shining through the palm trees. Water trucks have just sprinkled the streets. The moisture and the fresh gentle breeze make the weather more bearable. Many people, fans in their hands, are walking outside in their clogs, men wearing T-shirts, women muslin blouses or silk dresses, their children trailing behind them. People stop to greet Dingya and Tianmei, invariably asking "Have you eaten?" their eyes regarding Tianlei and Yishan. Because Tianmei has asked her husband not to

introduce Tianlei, much time and many questions are spared.

In a big clean reception room cooled by four ceiling fans, two couples sit on the couches. They stand up as Dingya and the others enter the room. One couple is Mr. Chen, associate director of support services at the sugar factory, and his wife; the other Mr. Zhang, manager of accounting, and his wife--all invited to meet Tianlei. Dingya asks everyone to come to the table, reserving the seat of honor for Tianlei, and the meal begins. When Tianlei decided to come to the South, he thought he could temporarily escape from banquets and associated superficialities. Never did he imagine he would fall into the same situation again, at least not so soon. During the course of the meal, the topic of their conversation soon turns to life in the United States. Tianlei merely talks about some of his general observations of the country--such as the vast number of automobiles, big houses, machinery, and tasty steaks--but nothing specific about himself or anyone else. When they ask him about Chinese restaurants in New York, he tells them that the food they serve is quite genuinely Chinese. He deliberately avoids discussing how unpleasant it is to work in such places. Who knows, these two couples may have children working there right now.

The dishes and wine are superb, and Dingya keeps piling food on Tianlei's and Yishan's plates. Chatting while they eat, they dine for almost two hours. Afterwards they relax



on the couches. Everyone has eaten more than usual; even Yishan's white-laced blue dress, which normally fits her perfectly, seems bulging. Thus when watermelon is served, she, although thirsty, declines. Their conversation continues, and finally it comes time for Dingya's colleagues and their wives to say good-bye. Tianlei follows Dingya to see them off at the gate, and upon returning to the room Tianlei, slightly under the influence of alcohol, says to Dingya with a forced smile, "The meal would have been more enjoyable if it had been just for the four of us in our family. I feel awkward when there are strangers around."

"More people make it more fun," says Dingya, pushing up his glasses. "Also, they heard you had come back from the States, so they wanted to have a chance to meet you. You had a good chat with them anyway."

"I must have grown an extra arm or something in the U.S., so everyone wants to see me."

Dingya becomes silent, and the smile on his face disappears. Noticing this change, Tianmei hurries to ask her brother, "You just said 'the four of us in our family.' Think about that phrase. Isn't there something wrong with it?"

As Tianmei turns to look at Yishan, Yishan suddenly blushes and says with a smile, "I'm going to get you for this!"

Rising, Dingya says to Tianmei, "Maybe we should go now. Miss Chen and Tianlei must be tired after a whole day on the train. We can continue our chat tomorrow." Turning to

Tianlei, he adds, "I'm going to take tomorrow off, and I'll show you and Miss Chen our factory. If you don't want to see it, I can take you to Tainan."

"Are you sure you can get away from work?"

"Yes. I've spoken to our director about that. He said Mr. Chen, my assistant, could take care of things while I'm gone."

Tianlei is about to say something but holds back. Instead, he says, "Let me walk you home. The surroundings here are so pleasant I'm sure this place produces poets."

"Then maybe you should stay here for a year and produce a masterpiece," Tianmei says.

"I wish I could," says Tianlei. "Writing poems when you're twenty, novels when you're thirty, and taking up philosophy when you're forty--that's not my cup of tea. I think I'm more suited for reading Nietzsche."

"There you go again," says Yishan. "You always sound so old. I hate it."

Tianmei, glancing at her brother, says nothing and walks to the door to put on her shoes.

Outside it starts to cool off and become a little breezy. After walking them home, Tianlei returns to the club along empty streets. Seeing lights in the quiet houses along the way, he can picture a family gathered in the living room: the children bending over a table studying, the mother sewing clothes by the light of a lamp, the father reading a

newspaper, a white spotted cat cuddled under the table. There is no traffic noise from the street or disturbance from neighbors, no dazzling movie ads in the distance, no punks nearby. In an environment like this, the only thing a father hopes for is a modest raise next year; all that a mother wants is to get her children some new clothes. As for the children, their desire may even be simpler--play more and do less homework on weekends. He would rather lead this type of simple life. He really would--because then he wouldn't be jealous of a colleague's promotion or an old classmate's receiving a Ford Foundation grant to travel to Europe. He wouldn't have to worry about how to spend a weekend or face the fear of loneliness. He wouldn't have to cautiously seek out a girl and dread the eventuality of losing her. Why, after so many years of schooling and so much life experience, is he feeling such tremendous terror and emptiness inside? He would rather live a peaceful life as people here do, but he knows he can never be one of them again. What he needs the most is peace, but peace is what he has lost forever.

At the end of the street is a basketball court. Basketball--another part of him that is long gone. In the past ten years he hasn't even touched a basketball. Walking up to the middle row of bleachers, he sits down, his eyes on the empty court, imagining players in blue shorts jumping and running after the ball, spectators cheering, he himself among

them, throwing his Boy Scout cap into the air. He watched quite a few ball games, especially football, when he was in the U.S., but sports no longer absorb his interest. He should, as Professor Chiu suggested, stay out in the country and enjoy the peace and quiet of a simple life--not out of obligation but for his own good. He really should.

Rising, he strolls back to Tianmei's house. Yishan may not understand how he feels about staying in Taiwan, but nevertheless she should be able to be reconciled to his wishes and stay here with him for at least a year or two. After that he can take her to the United States, even if it is only to satisfy her curiosity. He'll need to talk with her about all these thoughts.

Tianmei answers the door and, seeing that it is her brother, says, "You didn't go back to sleep? Do you know what time it is now? Yishan went to bed quite some time ago. Couldn't you wait till tomorrow to talk to her?" She yawns and sits on the floor. Tianlei also sits down. "What's so important?" she continues, staring at her brother. "I think you must be in love. Yishan seemed really happy tonight. She told me you were going to take her to the States." Then, with envy in her voice, she adds, "When Xiao-rong grows up, I hope you'll also take me to the U.S. and let a country person like me have a look at Disney World. All right?"

Tianlei does not respond.

"If you really want to see her now, I can go and get her,"

Tianmei says with a blank face.

He holds her down. "No, there's no need," he says. "I'd better go now so you can go back to sleep. You look really tired." He kisses her on the forehead. "They say it's easier to change rivers and mountains than to change a person's nature. That's definitely true. When you're not in a good mood, it really shows on your face. All right, I'll see you tomorrow."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next day Dingya takes Tianlei and Yishan to the Zheng Chenggong Shrine in Tainan. In Tianlei's mind, a shrine is a clean and quiet place, but to his surprise he finds this one entirely different. On the stone steps leading up to the shrine stand many dirty-looking, bare-chested children, their eyes either on Yishan's sunglasses or on her high-heeled shoes. Paper and fruit skins litter the ground. At the foot of the shrine are many souvenir and snack vendors. A mother holds her baby in one arm while fanning away flies with the other hand. A thin layer of dust covers the stands, to which flies persistently return. The couple follows Dingya through the shrine and sees Zheng Chenggong's statue, calligraphy hangings, as well as suits of armor and women's dresses from the period. The shrine, with its dirt floor and dim lighting, looks old and in disrepair. Since Yishan doesn't seem interested in this place, they quickly scan everything and are on their way to the Confucius Temple. There it is much cleaner and more spacious. A huge willow shades the entrance area, providing comfortable relief from the burning sun. They follow the clean flagstone path into the temple, and in front of the statue of Confucius is an incense burner from which a heavy smell arises. Tianlei takes several pictures of Yishan, and after they circle the temple, Dingya takes them to a newly opened western-looking beachside hotel for lunch.

The hotel is luxurious. On the big red pillars at the entrance are golden coiled dragons. Inside, crystal chandeliers hang in the lobby, the floor is waxed, and waiters in white uniforms are serving sparkling, imported wine at a marble bar. The restaurant is sparsely occupied and quiet; only an occasional clink of silverware can be heard. Sitting next to a window and facing the door is an overweight westerner, a napkin on his belly, noisily eating soup. Tianlei can tell from the man's looks that he is probably a factory foreman or a truck driver in the U.S. Now that he is overseas, he puts on a suit he had custom-tailored in Hong Kong and becomes a "gentleman." But the noise he makes while eating soup shows his lack of manners. The man repeatedly peers at Yishan while finishing his soup. Tianlei, noticing this, gazes at the man until he withdraws his stare from her. You act so cocky only because you're here, Tianlei thinks to himself. Don't think I can't tell what kind of a person you really are. After they sit down at a table, Yishan orders soup, a roast chicken dish, and a salad, and Dingya also orders his food from the Western menu. Tianlei merely asks for some fried rice with eggs.

"Why didn't you order a steak?" says Dingya to Tianlei. "The steaks here are better than the ones you find in Taipei."

"I'm not so interested in Western food."

"Maybe you had steaks in the U.S. every day and you grew sick of them."

"Having steaks every day? Even Americans who make twenty or thirty thousand a year can't afford to eat steaks that often, not to mention me," says Tianlei. "I make Chinese food for myself most of the time."

"How do you like Western food, Miss Chen?" asks Dingya.

"I love it," she answers. "Oh, by the way, you can call me Yishan."

"Yishan thinks the moon over America is rounder, too," says Tianlei.

Yishan gives him a dirty look.

"Of course she's not the only one who thinks that way," adds Tianlei. "A lot of young people now think like her."

"What about you, Tianlei, when you were her age?"

Hesitating, he replies, "That was many years ago. I don't remember."

Yishan, casting a sidelong glance at Tianlei, remains silent.

The waiter brings Dingya's and Yishan's soup, some rolls, butter, and crackers. Tianlei, lighting a cigarette, asks them to start first. He turns around and sees the fat man gnawing a chicken leg, his cheeks greasy, his long nose almost touching the meat in his hands.

"Your dish is here, Tianlei," Dingya tells him.

"Why do you keep staring at that man?" says Yishan in a slightly disapproving tone.

Not responding, Tianlei starts to eat. When he was a



student in Berkeley, he frequently made fried rice with eggs, but it never tasted as delicious as what he is eating now.

In the afternoon Dingya takes Tianlei and Yishan to Pier Anping for a cruise on the river, where they see many fishing boats. Afterwards they go to a fish market where Dingya buys some shrimp and a carp. As Dingya drives them through downtown Tainan, Tianlei notices that the architecture of the city is not as imposing as that of Taipei, and the streets are not quite as crowded, either. Although it is hot here, too, one feels less so because there is more open space. People's clothes are not quite as fashionable as in Taipei, and some pedestrians simply wear their coolest clothes and wooden clogs. Because there are fewer bicycles and even fewer cars on the streets, their blue Ford becomes conspicuous and many people stare at it as they drive by.

Back at Dingya and Tianmei's house, Yishan, upon entering the front door, notices a pair of white high-heeled shoes and an exquisite parasol. "It seems you have company inside," she says to Dingya.

Tianmei comes to the door to greet them. "You guys are back. Did you have a good time?"

"Who's here?" Dingya asks.

From the look on his sister's face, Tianlei already knows who the guest must be. He is suddenly brought back to the first time he went to see Meili at her house. Before knocking on the gate, he rehearsed his opening lines: "Is Miss Zhang

home? Can I. . .?" As he waited, perspiration poured down his forehead although the weather wasn't hot that day. Upon seeing the maid, who opened the door, Tianlei forgot to say what he had practiced and simply said, "I'm looking for Meili Zhang."

Staring at his sister, Tianlei asks, "Is it Meili in there?"

Tianmei nods. Dingya, handing a grocery bag to his wife, says, "Why don't you all go in first? I'm going to return the car. Oh, Tianmei, the fish needs to be cleaned and salted right away."

As they approach the living room, Meili rises. Tianlei, standing by the door, neither greets her nor introduces her to Yishan. He gazes at her without a word or a smile. Is she the Meili he once knew, or is she Meili's sister? Aunt? Or some relative of hers? Her hair, which used to be long, is now short, and her ears, once covered by her hair, now carry a pair of earrings. He remembers the tender spots behind her ears that he used to kiss. Her face looks the same as before, but with completely different characteristics. Her brows have been darkened, her big, innocent eyes replaced by mature womanhood, her formerly thin pink lips painted cherry-red. Her pointed chin, which used to be one of her better features, is now doubled. Her appearance now makes her look like a modern housewife instead of the blooming, innocent girl in his memory.

"Tianlei." She breaks the silence. Although her appearance has changed, her voice has not. Tianlei, though wanting to go up to her and embrace her, shakes her hand instead. He thought of her countless times--when he lived in the basement room in Berkeley and the apartment on the north side of Chicago, when he took the el, and when he saw young couples on weekends at movie theaters. He promised himself that if he ever saw her again--no matter if she were married or not--he would hold her tightly in his arms, even if it was only for a second. Yet all he does now is shake the hand he has kissed and fondled thousands of times before. "Hello, Meili," he says. "How have you been?"

"Fine," she replies. "What about you? You still look the same. I don't think you've changed a bit."

"A bit" is a favorite phrase of Meili's, just like the "really" that Jiali used all the time. Although it may sometimes be a little hard to conjure up the appearance of an old friend, one always remembers certain peculiar expressions associated with the person, and such expressions may bring back recollections of the past--the happy times shared together, the old sentiments, the broken promises. . . .

Meili's eyes are fixed on Tianlei, and Tianlei is also looking intently at her. Although she looks somewhat different now--her appearance may seem somewhat worldly--the feelings between them are still there. To break the silence, Tianmei begins, "Oh, Meili, let me introduce you two. This

is Yishan Chen, and this is Meili Zhang, my brother's old classmate."

Yishan, stepping forward and holding out her hand, says, "Oh, you're Ms. Zhang. Tianlei mentioned you several times in his letters. What a pleasure to meet you."

Everybody sits down, Yishan and Meili on a couch, Tianlei on a sofa opposite them. He notices the natural luster of Yishan's face and lips and the heavy makeup that Meili wears. Yishan's eyes are round with corners curving down; Meili's eyes look narrow. Yishan's chin is sharp and has a naughty suggestiveness to it; Meili's is plump. It's only been ten years, he thinks to himself. Can a woman change this much in ten years, or is it unfair in the first place to compare a woman in her thirties with one in her twenties?

"I live in Tainan," Meili begins, "because my husband works for the Zhanghua Bank."

"Oh, I see," says Tianlei. "You must have a lovely family, I'm sure."

"Well, we have three children. The oldest one is six, and the youngest one is almost a year now, so I'm tied down by them all the time. That's why I couldn't meet you at the airport. So, what do you think of Taipei now, Tianlei? Is it more exciting than before?"

Not wanting to engage in a superficial conversation, Tianlei simply says "Yeah." What he wants to ask her is whether or not she is happy with her life. Does she sometimes

think of him? When she goes to Taipei, does she visit the places where they used to go? He wonders if Meili is indeed so insensitive to his thinking or just pretending to be that way.

Rising, Tianmei says, "Yishan, you guys have been out the whole day. Would you like to freshen up?"

Yishan, glancing at Tianlei, says, "That's a good idea. Then they can talk too."

When they are left alone in the living room, Meili, taking a sip of her tea and turning the cup in her hands, asks, "How have you been? You look a little thinner now." Her voice and expression remind him of the last time they went for coffee on Sun Yat-sen Road, her tone showing care as well as reproof. She complained about his leaving then. Is she blaming him for returning now?

"How could I maintain my weight?" he says.

She raises her head, her earrings swaying with the motion. As she is about to say something, Tianlei commands abruptly, "Take your earrings off!"

She looks at him in a stupor. Setting her cup on the table, she takes off her earrings and puts them in her purse. She picks up her cup, slightly flustered. Instead of drinking from it, she says, "There was nothing I could do. My mother was real sick, and I was scared."

"I'm not blaming you. It was all my fault," Tianlei says, lighting up a cigarette, his hand trembling as it holds the

match. A multitude of feelings rush to his mind as he continues, "I made the wrong choice. I shouldn't have left without you."

"What's the point in bringing up old memories?" she says, noticing his slightly tightened brows as he puffs on the cigarette. "I don't remember you smoking before."

Hearing her former tone of concern, his heart skips a beat. It was all because of you, he says to himself, that I ever started smoking. "I didn't, but I do now."

"Tianlei!" she whispers his name, her voice quivering.

"You've been happy all these years, I hope," Tianlei says, his voice becoming soft. "At least that's the impression I got from Tianmei."

After a pause, she nods. "He's a little older than me but he treats me pretty nicely, so I guess I should be satisfied, although. . . ."

"Although what?" he asks with an imploring look.

"Although he's still different from you. Even though sometimes you weren't so nice, I felt happy just to be with you." She raises her head and looks at him wide-eyed, her pupils almost as big as they used to be.

"I only lived that feeling once in my life, and I'm glad I was fortunate enough to experience it. I don't know what more I can ask for. I hope you're not mad at me, Tianlei."

He suddenly forgives her completely. He wants to hold her in his arms and tell her that he no longer holds a grudge

against her betrayal, that everything is in the past, and that all he desires is for them both to cherish the memory. But before he fully stands up, he sits down again. She has become a part of memory, and he has no right even to touch her. "I'm not angry," he says.

"She looks very lovely," Meili says. "You two are a good match."

With his eyes fixed on hers, he says, "I know, but I can't treat her any way I want, as I did with you."

She gasps deeply but, instead of sighing, blows the tea leaves in her cup with her breath, her eyes and face moist from the steam.

Hearing no sound from the living room, Tianmei calls out, "Hey, Tianlei, you want to come freshen up? Yishan says she'll take your place entertaining Meili."

Before Tianlei can stand, Yishan is in the living room. "Why don't you go ahead and freshen up?" she says. "I'll be here."

When Tianlei and his sister return to the living room, Meili says she should be going home. Tianmei asks her to stay for dinner, but she declines, saying that her children are waiting. Thus, everyone accompanies her to the door, where Tianlei suddenly turns and says to his sister, "I'll walk Meili home." Tianmei looks at Yishan, and Yishan, in turn, looks at Tianlei, whose eyes are still on Meili.

"Well, that's not necessary," Meili says, looking down at

her shoes. "And it's so hot outside."

"You can give her a ride home if you want," says Tianmei. "Dingya's got the key for the car."

"Really, there's no need," says Meili. "My pedicab is waiting for me at the factory entrance."

"Then let me walk you there," Tianlei says. He ties his shoes and picks up Meili's parasol. Meili, after saying good-bye to Tianmei and Yishan, leaves with Tianlei. Outside, the fierce sun blinds their eyes. Tianlei opens the parasol, and because it is small they have to walk close together. Meili has on a violet short-sleeved, knee-length dress. She has gained a few pounds, but not to the point of being plump. Tianlei also has short sleeves, and their bare arms touch now and then. Although the weather is unusually hot, her skin feels dry and smooth to the touch.

They started dating in their second year of college. Because she wanted more freedom from her parents, Meili moved to a student dormitory. Every Sunday evening they would go to Xi Men Ding to see a movie. On their way back to the campus he would give her a ride on his bicycle. When they reached Benevolence Boulevard, she would put her slender arms around his waist, her head leaning on his back. Often he would hold the handlebar with one hand while stroking her arms with the other, whispering, "Hey, what are you thinking, Sweetheart?" Sometimes she would sit sideways on the frame between the handlebars and the seat, and when there was no



one around she would hold the handlebars while he rested his hands on her shoulders. When he reached down, she giggled and said, "You devil, you're going to get us both killed!" Occasionally they would stop while she, with her eyes closed, rested her forehead against his chest, and he would grip her head until she screamed, "You're choking me to death!"

"Meili, do you sometimes think about our past?" he asks.

Glancing at him, she says, "Yes. And there's nothing I can do about it. Each time I came to visit your sister I would learn some news about you and then feel miserable for several days afterwards. At night I would dream about the things we had done." Seeing a trace of a smile on Tianlei's face, she adds, "During the first couple of years after I got married, I often blamed myself for deserting you. But later it occurred to me that maybe things were predestined for us; perhaps we were only meant to spend a few years together but not for life. So, when I thought about it that way, it seemed that that's the way it had to be."

Tianlei does not respond. He now realizes that his feelings for Jiali stemmed merely from infatuation and the thirst for companionship. As for Yishan, he likes her, perhaps even dotes on her, but Meili is the one he has always loved, even when he hated her. If he could now choose among the three, he would probably pick Yishan because he cares the least for her. Then it wouldn't break his heart if he exposed his weaknesses in front of her. He would never want to see

Meili hurt or Jiali looking down on him, but if Yishan ever lost respect for him, or if he unintentionally hurt her feelings, he wouldn't feel quite as bad. He is convinced that if Meili had followed him to the United States and married him, she wouldn't have been as content as she is today. For a woman as fragile and dependent as she is, life in America wouldn't have made her happy. If she had written and asked him to come back and marry her, he might not have been able to finish his Ph.D. and he probably would have blamed her for that. The only way they could have been together and both felt happy is if he had never gone abroad.

"I really shouldn't have left," he says.

"Would that have been possible when you saw everybody else was leaving, and you always wanted to be a step ahead of others?"

"I was too naive then."

"It was my fault, too, because I was so stubborn and determined not to leave home," she says, accidentally touching the back of Tianlei's hand. He changes the parasol from his left hand to his right and, as he did before, grasps her hand in his. Her hand is still as soft as it always was. He suddenly remembers what Jiali once said to him as she showed him her hands: "Take a look. This is what I've got for staying home for ten years in this country. When I was home in Taiwan, I didn't even need to wash my own handkerchiefs; the maid did that, too. Look at my hands now

--they are even good enough for cleaning for the most particular hostess in Taiwan! Don't you think it's sad that after so many years of school I ended up a housewife? Sure the house here is a little better, but it's still a house! Some girls in Taiwan simply marry and settle down there after they graduate and then they hire housekeepers. They may not have a master's degree like me, but I think they are ten times smarter."

Holding the hand that's not been roughened by detergent, broom, vacuum cleaner, or spatula, Tianlei says, "No, it wasn't your fault, Meili. I just shouldn't have left. To anybody, the most important thing is to be happy and content. Money and fame can give you excitement or stimulation, but that's only temporary. You have such a peaceful life! I'm happy for you."

Meili, a little overcome by emotion, stops and turns to look at him. Tianlei notices the freckles on her face and the tiny wrinkles around her nose and the corners of her eyes, but it's still a face he wants to cherish.

"So you've been living alone all these years," says Meili. "That makes me more concerned."

She stands so close to him now that if he only lowered his head a little, he would be able to kiss her. Seeing the look in his eyes, she turns and starts walking again. "Are you telling me that you've never met anyone else that you liked?" she asks, wiping perspiration from her forehead with her

handkerchief.

"Yes, I have, but she was married, just as you are."

"Was she good-looking?" she asks, out of a woman's curiosity. Tianlei was asked the same question when Yishan's name was first brought up in front of Jiali.

"She wasn't one of the most beautiful women I've seen, but she does have her special charm."

"Were you in love with her?" she asks, her tone slightly jealous.

"Yes," he replies. "But it was a hopeless infatuation." Although they have been apart for such a long time, he can still read her mind. "Why didn't you ask how I feel about Yishan?" he asks her.

"I could see that you like her but you don't completely love her," Meili says. "Your tone was different when you spoke of the other woman. That must have been hard on you, I mean your relationship with her."

"Yes," he says, "but it wasn't as hard on me as when I heard you were going to be married."

She presses the hand that holds hers, signaling him to change the subject. "Tianmei told me you two had started by writing to each other," says Meili. "She seems to be a nice girl, and I think she likes you a lot."

"'Likes' is the right word."

"It's a good start, anyway," she says.

Near the factory entrance are three stands selling bananas,

sugar cane, and litchi that have been dried by the sun. Two women wearing straw hats and chatting by the roadside turn to look at the couple under the parasol.

"It was nice to see you again," Meili says. "Take good care of yourself."

Tianlei doesn't let go of her hand. "Is this your pedicab? I'm going to accompany you home."

Meili hesitates. She wants to spend more time with him but isn't sure if it is the right thing to do. When they dated, they used to love to get into a pedicab and spend a few cozy moments together.

"Meili, I'm leaving for Hualian tomorrow, and then back to Taipei. If my plans don't change, I'll leave Taiwan at the end of September, and I don't know when I'll be back again." Squeezing her hand harder, he adds, "Please, let me ride with you to your house. I'm not going to go in."

"That's not what I'm afraid of," she says. "I'll just hate to say good-bye to you then." In her heart, she wants to be with him just as much as he does, even if they just sit and talk. If he decides to kiss her--which she knows he might--she will not consider letting him do so as being disloyal to her husband. "If you really insist on coming," she says, "please do."

As she steps into the pedicab, her heart beats so fast that she can feel her chest throbbing. She tries to cover it with a hand. Tianlei closes the parasol, and as he is about to

step up, he hears Yishan calling him from a distance.

Running up in clogs, she gasps, "A Mr. Chiu . . . from Taipei . . . just called."

"Really? Do you know what he wants?"

"He didn't say," she replies, still trying to catch her breath, her cheeks flushed from running.

He withdraws his foot from the step and asks, "Is he on the phone now?"

"No, but he wanted you to return his call this evening."

"Oh, in that case, why don't you go back first," he says. "I'll accompany Meili home and I'll be back shortly."

Yishan, neither responding nor leaving, stares at Tianlei without expression. Not knowing what to say next, he proceeds to step up again when Meili says to him, "There is no need, Tianlei. Really. Why don't you go back now?"

"Then good-bye, Mrs. Wu," Yishan calls. "Tianlei and I are leaving for Taitung tomorrow. See you."

Tianlei, looking displeased, says to Yishan, "Listen to me. You go first. I'm going to see Meili home."

Holding Tianlei's hand, Meili, her forefinger lightly scratching his palm as she used to do whenever he fell into a bad mood, says with her eyes on his face, "Good-bye, Tianlei. Take care of yourself." Then, pulling her hand out from his, she waves to Yishan and signals the driver to leave.

Watching Meili's pedicab go away, Tianlei sighs.

"Hey, are you going to stand there the rest of the day?"

Yishan says, glaring at him.

"Yishan, did you really have to make up a phone call?"

"Me make up a phone call? If you don't believe me, go ask your sister. Actually I don't care a bit how much longer you wanted to talk with your old lover. I just didn't want you to get a heat stroke standing in the sun that long."

"Were you really worrying about that or was it something else?"

"What else would I be worrying about?" says Yishan.

"Then I have no idea why you came all the way here to get me."

"You are odd," says Yishan as she starts to head back, her clogs clattering on the pavement.

"Me odd? You wouldn't even let me see her home. God knows why."

"I didn't stop you from doing that," Yishan says, throwing her hair back. She quickens her steps but a few moments later stops under a big tree waiting for Tianlei. "I was simply worried about you," she says. "Well, that's all in the past, so let's forget about it."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The ride to Tainan brings back Tianlei's childhood memories of the Sino-Japanese war period. About half of the six- or seven-hour ride is spent on bumpy roads, jarring every bone in his body. Unable to concentrate his thoughts on anything, he turns to look at Yishan, who sits next to him, her complexion pale, eyes closed, and brows knit. Tianmei, who sits behind them, has dozed off while her daughter watches the view with curiosity--rice paddies and sugar cane fields withered by the scorching sun, a farmer walking his plow behind his ox, his wife standing to one side. As Xiao-rong watches, her braids swing with the motion of her head. Tianlei pulls the end of her braids and she turns to look at him.

"Why are you pulling my hair, Uncle Moe?"

"Are you enjoying the scenery?"

"Yeah, I am."

"Xiao-rong can never stay put at home," says Tianmei with her eyes half closed. "She loves being outside, no matter where we go."

"Just like you, huh?" Tianlei says. "Do you remember what Mom used to call you?"

"What? I don't remember."

"A jumping jack."

"Was Mommy a jumping jack, Uncle Moe?" Xiao-rong asks.



Tianmei, glancing at her brother and shaking her head, says, "Look, Xiao-rong, there is a big ox over there." Turning to Tianlei, she says, "I thought you came out east to see the sights. How come you're not looking out the window?"

Outside, all the crops have withered, the scene reminding Tianlei of a trip he once took in America's Midwest, the summer when he took a job in Yellowstone National Park. On their way there, he and his friends stopped in a small town in South Dakota to spend the night. The town had a population of only about two hundred people. It took them a while to find a hotel. Upon entering their room they encountered a strong odor. They opened the only window, but immediately mosquitoes and other insects began flying in, so they had to close it. Halfway through the night, his whole body felt itchy. He got up, turned on the light, and screamed at the top of his lungs when he saw ants crawling all over him. He ran to the shower and stood there for a full ten minutes under the cold and rusty water. His scream woke up his friends, and since none of them was able to sleep, they sat on the edge of the bed and smoked until dawn. As he and his friends drove into eastern Wyoming, all they saw in every direction was desert, without a trace of green, and for hundreds of miles there wasn't a single house or gas station.

When he was a student in Taiwan, what Tianlei admired most about the United States was its prosperity and modern way of life--the skyscrapers in New York City, the display windows

on Fifth Avenue, the night life in Atlantic City. . . . It wasn't until he saw Manhattan, the south side of Chicago, and Watts in Los Angeles that he realized the slums in this country are just as bad as those anywhere in the world.

Their bus stops about noon, and Tianlei, Yishan, Tianmei, and her daughter all get off for lunch. The shabby, narrow street is lined with food stands on both sides, and Tianlei sees dust raised by passing vehicles settling on the salted poultry. A lady with gold crowns on her teeth, wearing a greasy apron, beckons customers near her restaurant entrance, spraying those closest to her with her wet words. Tianlei loses his appetite, and Yishan, wearing sunglasses, covers her face with a handkerchief. Tianmei, while not as offended, still does not stop by any of the stands.

"Mommy, when are we going to eat?" Xiao-rong asks.

"I don't know," she answers. "I wish we had brought some sandwiches along."

"Oh well, it's too late to think of that," says Tianlei.

"What did you say?" Yishan asks.

"Never mind," he says. "So, are we going to eat or not? I heard the guy sitting in front of me say it's going to take several more hours before we get to Taitung."

"I'd rather go hungry," Yishan says.

"Either way is fine with me," says Tianmei.

"But Xiao-rong said she was hungry."

"Well, why don't we find a little something to eat?"

Tianlei suggests. "We can ask them to rinse the dishes with boiling water."

Finally they settle on a restaurant that looks clean from the outside. As they sit down, the owner, a big smile on her face, brings them hot towels, and Tianmei takes one to wipe Xiao-rong's hands. The lady also brings them three cups of tea and a warm Coke with no ice for Xiao-rong. There are seven or eight tables in the restaurant, and as they wait, Tianlei's taste buds are already aroused by the delicious smell of noodles. They order four bowls of noodles with ribs, and Tianlei asks the lady to make absolutely sure the bowls are clean, adding that he is willing to pay extra for the service. The owner nods with a smile, and as she leaves, Yishan calls out, "Don't forget to rinse the bowls with boiling water!" The other customers in the room all turn to look at them.

The room is hot and stuffy. Xiao-rong wants to drink the pop, so Tianmei opens the bottle for her. When their noodles come, Tianlei, seeing the fat on top, advises the ladies not to eat it. While Tianlei is devouring his noodles, Yishan keeps wiping her chopsticks and spoon with her handkerchief. By the time she starts, Tianlei has almost finished his.

"This is really delicious," says Tianlei. "I've made noodles myself thousands of times, but they never tasted as good." Then, winking at Yishan, he adds, "The moon over America may be rounder, but Chinese noodles are still better."

Right?"

"I'm not talking to you," Yishan says.

"Tianmei, why did you stop eating?"

"I'm really full," she says. "It's not that I don't like it."

"I can't eat any more either," says Yishan, blushing a little.

When their bus arrives at the Taitung bus depot, they are met by Dingya's colleagues at the Taitung Sugar Factory. This factory is bigger than the one where Dingya works, but it is equally clean. The moment they enter the factory guest house, Tianlei is impressed by the orderly arrangement of the flowers by the door, the sparkling windows, and the spotless floor. An attendant leads them to their rooms while a porter carries in their baggage. After they have had a chance to freshen up, an attendant comes and takes them to the dining hall, where Mr. Jiang, the factory's director of support services, his wife, and several other people are waiting. Tianmei has met all of them before, so she begins chatting with them. Taitung, though less metropolitan than Tainan, has an extraordinarily good cuisine.

"The food is really delicious," says Tianlei to Mr. Jiang in an attempt to start a conversation. "You have excellent chefs here!"

"Our chef is originally from Shandong," says the director. "He served in the army initially, and after he was discharged

he came to our factory. He's been here for almost three years. Once a foreign official who visited our factory wanted to take him to his country, but that never materialized."

As they speak, a tall and dark man comes out from the kitchen.

"Mr. Wei, let me introduce you to Mr. Moe. He is Dingya Wang's brother-in-law. Mr. Moe just came back from the United States. He was just telling me how wonderful the food is."

Nodding with a smile, Mr. Wei asks, "Do you frequently go to Chinese restaurants in America?"

"No, not really," replies Tianlei. "I was living in a small town, so there wasn't a 'real' Chinese restaurant there. In big cities like Chicago, there are quite a few Chinese restaurants, but they are mostly Cantonese and their food is tailored to Americans' taste, so I really didn't care for it."

"I heard there were scores of Chinese restaurants in New York," says Mr. Jiang.

"I'm sure there are a lot more than that," Tianlei replies. "But I've only been to a couple of them. They were all right."

"So what's your plan, Mr. Wei?" someone at the table asks. "Aren't you going to open a Chinese restaurant abroad and make some big bucks?"

"I wish I could," says the chef. "An old acquaintance of mine got to Washington, D.C., somehow and opened a restaurant there. He wrote to me not long ago and said his business was

doing really well, and he wanted me to go there and help him out."

"Wouldn't that be nice? You'll make a lot of money there!" says Mr. Jiang. "Wait till I tell this to our general manager. He won't let you go."

Smiling, Mr. Wei continues, "Sir, you just came back from America, so you must know how someone can go about getting there. I've lived here all my life, and I would really love to broaden my horizon a little. If you can help me get over there and set up a restaurant, we can split the profits. How does that sound?"

"Well, my sister also wants to go there, and I don't even know how to help her!" says Tianlei, smiling wryly. But seeing that everyone's eyes are on him, he adds, "When I get back to Taipei, I can ask about that for you at the American Consulate, and I'll let you know what I find out. How's that?"

Mr. Wei, rubbing his hands together, thanks Tianlei and leaves. In the evening, after their hosts have departed, Tianlei, Yishan, and Tianmei talk over tea in a small reception room.

"It seems that everyone, from college students to chefs, wants to go to the United States," says Tianlei with a sigh. "No matter whether they go there to study for a Ph.D., to make money, or to marry an American, they just want to go there. I don't know why. Even those who live comfortably here still

want to go, and no matter how tough life gets over there, no one wants to come back. This has got to be the oddest phenomenon of the twentieth century!"

"Well, you came back, didn't you?" says Tianmei. "Oh, by the way, you spoke so long on the phone yesterday with Mr. Chiu. What did you talk to him about?"

Tianlei, glancing at Yishan, whose eyes are on him, says, "When I went to see him last time, he asked me to stay and teach here and to run a journal with him. I told him it would be a major decision for me and I needed some time to think it over, so he called me yesterday to see if I had made my decision."

"What did you say to him?" asks Yishan.

"I told him I hadn't decided."

"Then you are seriously considering staying?" asks Tianmei.

"I don't know. Maybe."

A silence follows. A few moments later Yishan, declaring that she is tired, goes to her bedroom. After she is gone, Tianmei says to her brother, "I think I know what kind of situation you are in right now. Personally, there is no doubt I want to see you stay, because I want us to be together. Also, our parents are getting old, and if you leave, they won't know if they'll be able to see you again. I know you probably aren't thrilled about your teaching job there, so you might actually want to teach here. Those are valid reasons for you to consider staying, of course. But

once you decide to stay in Taiwan, I'm quite sure you'll lose Yishan. Think about it--why has she been writing to you all these years? She's taken the overseas studies exams several times in the past couple of years and still has no chance of passing them, so she is counting on marrying you to go abroad. That's been her parents' wish, too. So, if you are not going back, obviously she won't agree to marry you."

"Then we'll just let it happen," says Tianlei.

"You think it's going to be that simple?" says Tianmei. "Can you honestly say you're not in love with her?"

"If I stay in Taiwan, do I need to worry about finding a woman to get married?"

"You're right, you don't, but you and Yishan have known each other for so long, and if you broke up now it would be a waste of time for both of you."

"Well, right now I'm only planning on staying a year or two, so she should be able to wait that long if she really cares for me."

"Just a year or two?" says Tianmei. "Then why bother? You can't accomplish a whole lot for the school in that amount of time anyway."

"No, I'm not doing it for the school or anyone else," says Tianlei. "I just want to live a peaceful life for a while and do some of the things that I've been wanting to do. If she truly loves me, she will understand. Tianmei, if I make the decision not to go back now, will you help me convince



her to stay with me?"

The second day they spend the morning in the downtown area. Taitung is not nearly as cosmopolitan as Tainan, not to mention Taipei. In the afternoon they visit a pineapple processing plant and a farm, and all retire early in the evening. The third day they take a train to Hualian, a city with wide streets but few pedestrians. There are no bright lights here at night, no bustling crowds, nor does the city have any famous historic sites. But Tianlei likes it. He likes the simple and open character of the city, and buildings that have withstood numerous earthquakes. Even the sandy ocean breeze seems pleasant to him.

Their guest house, a three-story building, is located halfway up a mountain, the windows of their top floor suite facing a huge rock in the middle of a pond. At nine in the evening, the streets are practically deserted. After they return from dinner, Tianlei, who has been carrying Xiao-rong on his back, puts the girl to bed, and the three of them come out and sit beside a rock enjoying the moonlight and the mildly salty breeze. Sipping tea while having a cigarette, Tianlei, for the first time in over a decade, feels truly relaxed and peaceful. After some time Tianmei says good night, leaving her brother and Yishan in the quiet moonlight. Tianlei, holding Yishan in his arms, recalls his college years with Meili and the night when Jiali came to his basement apartment in Berkeley to say good-bye, his mind far away as

he kisses Yishan.

The next morning, a jeep from the sugar factory takes them to the Tailu Pavilion and Tianxiang. Tianlei can't help being deeply amazed by the incredible beauty afforded by man and nature. He is reminded of Montclair in California and other scenic spots he has been to in the United States. Overlooking the rivulets down below and the stones in them, he imagines how much hard work must have been involved in digging the tunnels through these mountains. He takes a deep breath of the fresh mountain air--something he couldn't even dream of doing in his fifty-eighth-floor New York apartment. The fresh mountain breeze softens the wrinkles on his face, and the sight of the sun setting over the bridge soothes his eyes. When they go into a tunnel, Tianlei shouts like a child and, tilting his head, listens to the echo of his own voice. He takes pictures of Tianmei and Yishan in front of an arch-shaped door to the Evergreen Temple, and holding Xiao-rong, who sits on a handrail, he asks Yishan to take pictures of him and his niece with the sky and steep cliffs in the background. As they walk through the tunnels, he carries Xiao-rong on his shoulders, whistling the familiar tune, "Sweet Love, Come, Share My Joy with Me."

"Hey, wait for me," Yishan shouts from behind.

Hiding in a dark spot, he mimics birds chirping.

"Tianlei, where are you?" Yishan calls out.

He picks up Xiao-rong in his arms and runs outside the

tunnel. In the bright sunlight, he laughs as he shouts back, "I'm right here!"

"You devil," says Yishan, catching up. "You almost lost me!"

The mountain range in Tianxiang is not as imposing as that near the Tailu Pavilion. They stop by a teahouse behind the bus depot to cool off.

"All these places are so wonderful. I'm so excited I feel I could fly," says Tianlei, whose whole body is soaked with perspiration. "Mm, good tea! It must have been made with the water from the rivulet."

"Gosh, I'm so tired I could die," says Yishan. "I don't think I'll ever want to come here again."

"Really? Actually I wouldn't mind living here for some time," says Tianlei, sipping his tea with a smile. "I think the best season to come would be fall because it would be cooler then." Turning to Tianmei, he continues, "It's funny that in all those years I was in the U.S., I could never get used to Americans putting a sheet between a blanket and the bed. I missed the quilt that I used to have at home." He looks at the mountains in the distance, adding, "Think about it--wouldn't it be nice to spend the fall here? In the evening you can lie under a quilt doing some light reading and drinking tea while you listen to the sound of waterfalls from the mountains, or you can even set up a stove and make some popcorn or roast chestnuts. When you get up in the

morning, you can start making some rice porridge and then go out to take a walk. By the time you come back, the porridge will be there ready for you. Then during the day you can do anything you want--read a book or write. You can even take a walk in the rain as long as you carry an umbrella with you. That's the kind of life I'd love."

"I'm sure you'd be fed up with that kind of life within a month," says Tianmei.

"I doubt if it would even last that long," adds Yishan. "Maybe a couple of weeks at the most."

"You don't have to believe me if you don't want to," says Tianlei, staring at them. "If I had a chance to live here, I'd stay at least six months." In his mind he knows Jiali would understand him, for she has lived in that foreign land even longer than he has and knows what it means to live here.

"Maybe we should start heading back to the hotel," Tianmei suggests. "The factory might need the car."

That evening, everybody goes to bed early. Around midnight Tianlei wakes up and gets out of bed, puts on his clothes, and goes out to take a walk along the quiet streets. He has been here for only two days, and he is already deeply attached to it. When he traveled in the United States, no matter how wonderful the scenery might be, he never felt such a bond between himself and the place he visited. In his last few days in Berkeley, he rode his bike around every night--not because he had feelings for the town, but because of the

Chinese friends he had made there. As he is about to leave Hualian, he thinks about how much he is going to miss this place and when he might be able to come here to live; but deep down inside, he knows that living here is just a dream. He hardly knows when, or if ever, he will come again. At the time he left home to study in the United States, he had no idea that he was going to spend the best ten years of his life there. If he leaves again, when will be the next time he returns--ten years, twenty, or never? Is there anything more depressing in the world than staying where one's heart is not?

The next day they take a bus to Su Ao. During the four-hour ride, Tianlei's heart is in his throat from fear because of the dangerous, winding roads on the mountains. One summer when he worked as a truck driver hauling groceries and ice cubes between San Francisco and Carmel, each time he drove up the steep mountains he held his breath whenever he peeped down at the vast ocean below. But that bears no comparison to what is before his eyes now. On one side of the road are steep cliffs whose tops are out of sight; on the other side, far below, the great expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Each time their bus makes a turn, Tianlei clenches his fists, feeling as though the entire vehicle is on the brink of plunging into the ocean. Yishan, sitting away from the window, hides her head behind Tianlei's shoulder as she murmurs, "My God, it scares me to death to look outside."

Tianlei turns to look at his sister, who, with a pale face,

clutches Xiao-rong in her arms, her eyes gaping at the driver. Though she does not complain as Yishan does, Tianlei can tell that his sister is also uneasy.

"Are you scared, Tianmei?" he asks.

She nods lightly.

"I'm not, Uncle Moe," says Xiao-rong.

"What a brave girl!" says Tianlei. "You like the view outside?"

"Yeah, I do. Uncle Moe, is that a sea over there or a river?"

"That's an ocean. I just came back from the other side of it."

"Oh. Were you scared when you came over?"

"As a matter of fact I was," he answers with a smile.

"What were you scared of? Drowning in the sea?"

"Well, I don't think that was it."

"I'm absolutely amazed how good this driver is," Tianmei cuts in. "He's so skillful. Tianlei, do you think you'd dare to drive on this road?"

"I doubt it. It's not a matter of skill. It's whether you have the guts to do it."

As the bus climbs further up the mountain, all they see on one side are tall cliffs and protruding rocks, and on the other the vast expanse of the ocean. Finally, they reach Su Ao, and Yishan is able to let out a breath.

"My God, what a scary ride," Yishan says. "I hardly dared

to breathe!"

"You shut your eyes all the way and missed all the pretty sights," says Tianlei.

"Well, that I'm not too concerned about," she says, one hand on her chest. "I am not even sure if I should have come. The ride almost gave me a heart attack. Did you get scared, Tianmei?"

"A little at first, but after a while I became used to it," says Tianmei. "The view was really fantastic. It's a shame you missed all that."

After lunch, they get on the train to Taipei, leaving the joy and tranquility found only in the mountains and streams and returning to the hustle and bustle of city life. By the time they get off the train, everyone is tired, and because the weather is unusually hot, Xiao-rong gets grouchy, so they take a taxi and go directly home.

Tianlei's father is away, and his mother, standing by the yard entrance, says with a big smile, "Did you all have a good trip? Xiao-rong, my darling, come over here and give your grandma a hug. Tell me, did you have a good time? Did you miss me?"

Tianlei collapses on the couch while Yishan and Tianmei go to freshen up. Ah-cui brings in some water in a washbasin for Tianlei and places several bottles of chilled beverages on the credenza. His mother turns on the fan and sits down facing Tianlei with Xiao-rong on her lap. After washing his

face, he changes his shirt, gulps down a bottle of cold soda, and returns to the couch.

"There is no place like home," he says. "Isn't that right, Mom?"

"Absolutely," she says. "That's why I was just saying to your dad if the Chens have no objections, we should start planning for the big day. Then after you two are married, you can both go back and I will have a major concern off my mind, too."

Is it for the sake of having a place called home to go to and having a person to talk with that I need to get married? he thinks to himself. "There you go again, Mom," he says. "Didn't I tell you last time that I needed some time to get to know her before I could even consider marrying her?"

"Tianlei, I don't mean to put pressure on you, but you have been back for nearly two months now. When I married your father, I didn't even know what he looked like on my way to his house; but look at us now, haven't we lived peacefully all these years? Young people nowadays say they care about things like love and mutual understanding, but they actually end up having more problems. As your mother, I certainly care very deeply about you and want to see you happy. Yishan is a nice girl and also good-looking, and she seems to like you a lot. I really don't know what you're waiting for. If you keep putting this off, I don't know how we can explain this to the Chens."



"All right, Mom, I see your point. I'm going to talk to Yishan about this in the next couple of days and see if we can agree on something. If we do decide to get married, then I'll leave the rest to you. How does that sound?"

"That's my boy," she says. "But you'd better do it soon, because time is running out."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Perhaps because of his conversation with Professor Chiu or from remembering his basement apartment in Berkeley and his apartment in Chicago, or maybe because of his recent trip to the Hualian area in the South, Tianlei, after a sleepless night and an extended walk around the neighborhood, finally decides on the third day after he returns to Taipei that he is going to stay here. At least for a year. Possibly forever.

Having made the decision, he goes to see Professor Chiu. He knocks on the door but there is no answer. He pushes the door open and sees the professor lying on his bed engrossed in his martial arts stories again. Tianlei pretends to clear his throat to catch Mr. Chiu's attention.

"Hello, Tianlei, come on in," says Professor Chiu. "I was thinking you should be back from the trip today or tomorrow." He rolls out of bed in a hurry, accidentally spilling tobacco from his pipe onto the sheet. Brushing it to the floor, he adds, "Oh, take a seat, please. Did you have a good trip?"

"It was wonderful," says Tianlei. "I hadn't expected Hualian to be so beautiful. I loved Suhua Avenue especially. I really had no idea there were such nice places in Taiwan."

Stuffing his pipe and lighting it, Mr. Chiu, his brows knit, eyes on Tianlei, says, "I remember right before you graduated, one of your classmates suggested that your whole

class should take a trip to the South, but very few people liked the idea. Everyone was either busy dating or applying for graduate school admission abroad. No one wanted to see other parts of Taiwan."

"At that time, everybody thought since Taiwan was a small place, they could always see it some other time."

"Exactly," says Mr. Chiu. "I'm sure many of our students who are abroad now have never seen any place else besides Taipei, so their impression of all of Taiwan is that it's dirty and messy."

"Professor Chiu," says Tianlei excitedly. "I've decided to stay."

Taking the pipe out of his mouth, his eyes fixed on Tianlei, the professor suddenly rises and walks over to him. He grasps Tianlei's hand and says with deep emotion, "You have really decided? Oh, my God, when you first came in and started talking about your trip to the South, I thought to myself: now the next thing he is going to tell me is he is leaving, but he doesn't know how to break the news to me. I really didn't expect just the opposite. I can't begin to tell you how excited I am about your decision. Tianlei, let's go out to Zhengji and have a couple of drinks to celebrate. After that I'm going to take you to the department chairman's home. I'm sure he'll be surprised, too, and we can discuss your teaching schedule for the fall. You don't know how badly we need people in our department!"

The childlike excited expression on Mr. Chiu's face makes Tianlei a little self-conscious and, at the same time, deeply moves him.

As they drink, Mr. Chiu tells Tianlei of his plans to run a purely literary journal. He wants it to contain three sections: one to introduce contemporary Western literature, focusing on one author in each issue; another section on literary criticism, an area in Taiwan's literary world where there is much progress to be made, and he particularly wants to see a shift of focus from critiquing characters in a literary work to the literary value itself; the third section on the young writers in today's Taiwanese literary arena, especially the ones with distinctive styles instead of those that simply copy Western authors. He plans to publish only four issues a year, but he wants each one to be up to his standards. "This type of publication is not going to be a big seller," says Professor Chiu, adding that he is willing to subsidize the journal with his own savings.

When Tianlei and Mr. Chiu arrive at the chairman's home, the chairman offers them watermelon, soft drinks, and iced tea. Learning of Tianlei's decision to stay and teach in his department, the chairman says with a big smile, "I've written numerous letters to our graduates in the United States asking them to take turns coming back to teach for a semester or two, but none of them would do that. They either told me they couldn't take the time off or somehow couldn't get away. The

long and the short of it, as I see it, is they don't want to give up their high pay over there. Wouldn't you say that's the real reason?"

Knowing that the chairman is right but unwilling to pass judgment on his colleagues in the United States, Tianlei does not respond.

"Nowadays," the chairman continues, "it's really hard to find people like you who are willing to make some self-sacrifice and come back here to work."

Tianlei, his brows knit, is about to say something when Professor Chiu winks at him, signaling him not to respond. After a pause, Tianlei says to the chairman, "There is one thing I'd like you to help me with. Could you keep the news from the press about my decision to stay? I don't want to see them trying to make something out of it. As a matter of fact, I decided to stay mostly for my own reasons. I don't want anybody to misunderstand it."

After they leave the chairman's home, Tianlei still feels uneasy about the situation. "What he said was exactly the kind of thing I was hoping not to hear," says Tianlei to Mr. Chiu. "As I told him, I want to teach here for my own personal reasons, so I didn't want to hear any high-flown words about my motives because they make me uncomfortable."

"Let others say what they like. You don't need to pay any attention to it," says Mr. Chiu. "Well, how about going back to my place for a while? Or we could go somewhere else. I'd

like to talk with you about running the journal."

"Professor Chiu, I do have one problem I was wondering if you could help me solve."

Eyeing him, Mr. Chiu asks, "Is it concerning your girlfriend?"

Tianlei nods.

"Let's go," says Mr. Chiu. "I'll take you to a place that I'm sure you'll like. It's quiet there so we can talk."

They take a pedicab and head toward Zhong Xiao Road. At the end of an alley, they go into a noodle house. The room, though small, with only three old, scarred tables, is surprisingly clean and well ventilated. The minute they sit down, a stout woman peeps at them from the kitchen door. Seeing Mr. Chiu, she says with a heavy Sichuan accent, "My goodness, I haven't seen you for ages. I thought you must have gone abroad again."

"No, how could I go abroad all the time? But I have been very busy. How are you and your husband?"

"We're still the same," she replies. "What would you like?"

"The same thing I always order." Turning to Tianlei, Mr. Chiu says, "Their noodles have that real Chengdu flavor. You should try some. I'm sure you'll like them." He asks the owner to bring a pot of tea and says to Tianlei, "Now, tell me about your problem."

"I think I told you a little bit last time. Both Yishan

and her family want us to get married and then go to the United States together. Yishan is a good girl but her ideas about the U.S. and being a student there are totally wrong. If I let her know of my plans to stay here, that's going to affect both her and her family's views about our marriage." Seeing that Mr. Chiu is about to ask him a question, he adds, "Of course, getting married is not our only option, but I would feel bad for having wasted several years of her time, especially when my parents and hers are close. I don't know how to explain this to them. On the other hand, as far as I myself am concerned, although Yishan is not everything I expected, she's still a nice girl, and I do like her a lot. If our relationship ended because of this, I'd feel rotten, too. Of course, you may say I would have no problem finding somebody else. That I know, but, believe it or not, I feel older inside than you do. I just don't have the energy to start a relationship all over again. Besides, I don't want to lose her like this."

A strong pungent smell announces the arrival of their noodles. Mr. Chiu, rubbing his hands together, his eyes on the bowl in front of him, says, "Why don't we eat first?" He stirs the sauce on top into the noodles and starts eating. "Mm, aren't they good? I found this place myself," he tells Tianlei. "There's nothing more satisfying in life than eating what you like. I don't care that much about what I wear or where I live, but eating the type of food I like and being

able to read the books that I want to are the most important things to me. The United States is a good place to live in many ways, but their food is really not all that great. One of our American friends invited us for Thanksgiving dinner. We went and even prayed with them at the table, but all we got was some bland turkey, some sweet potatoes, and pumpkin pie. As far as I'm concerned, my own baked potatoes would have tasted better. Their silverware was pretty, though. So, after that experience, I just stopped going to any American's house for a meal." He finishes his first bowl and asks the owner to bring him another one. "Tell me more about you and Yishan," Mr. Chiu says.

"That was all," says Tianlei, raising his head.

"So, your point is you don't want to give her up, right?"

Tianlei does not answer.

"Then, that's easy. All you have to do is tell her you've decided to stay and see what she says."

"I've hinted that to her several times, and each time she opposed the idea strongly. I've even gone as far as telling her why I didn't want to go back right away, but she just refuses to look at things from my point of view."

"Well, women never do that," says Mr. Chiu. "What you should do is to convince her emotionally." He pauses and starts laughing. "Look at us. I'm the one who's never been good with women, yet I'm telling you how to deal with a girl. Isn't that strange? Well, I think you should find a solution



yourself. The important thing is to be patient. If she really cares about you, she'll work things out with you."

They leave the restaurant about four o'clock, and Tianlei promises to contact Mr. Chiu soon regarding the journal. Then he takes a taxi to go to Yishan's home. An American car is parked in front of her house, and Tianlei knows they must have visitors. As he is about to turn around, their maid Ah-xiu steps out of the door carrying a fruit basket. She greets Tianlei and returns to the house to report his arrival. Soon Yishan's father appears at the door.

"Tianlei, haven't seen you for quite a few days. Come on in," says Mr. Chen. "A couple of your friends are here."

"My friends?"

"Yes, the Mo brothers. They're teaching at Qing Hua now."

Tianlei wants to leave but it's already too late--he has taken off one of his shoes. Hearing voices at the door, the Mo brothers come out of the living room.

"Mr. Moe, how have you been?" says Older Mo. "I heard you had made a trip to Hualian. Did you like it? My brother and I are thinking about visiting there, too. I hope they have adequate hotels over there."

Tianlei shakes hands with the Mo brothers and goes with them into the living room. On the tea table are watermelon rinds and empty Coca-Cola bottles. Yishan slouches on the couch, a ceiling fan blowing directly above her. She is wearing a light-green low-cut dress and a pair of green

sandals. Green is Tianlei's favorite color, but she is wearing it to entertain two men whom Tianlei detests. Yishan doesn't get up but merely smiles at him. He sits down in front of her and nods with an expressionless face.

"Ah-xiu," Yishan's mother calls out, "bring some more watermelon." Hearing no response, she begins to wonder where her maid has gone.

"I'll go and find out," says Yishan, moving languidly off the couch. As she passes Tianlei, she deliberately lets the hem of her dress caress him. He senses a fragrance as she passes but isn't sure if it is the perfume he brought her. Anger starts building up within him, and as his eyes meet the older Mo's, the latter says, "The Education Ministry has invited us to take a tour of Yeliu next week. They say the beaches there are very pretty, so we just came to see if Yishan wanted to go with us. With your permission, of course."

Tianlei wants to blast him with a series of spiteful questions but holds his tongue. You act so highhandedly just because you have a math Ph.D. from Yale? Tianlei thinks to himself. Or because you've been invited back to lecture? Because you make a couple of thousand dollars more than I do a year? Or is it because your eyes are in your forehead instead of where they're supposed to be? How could you ignore all basic human values and try to snatch away what someone else has worked for for several years? But he doesn't say any

of this to Older Mo. Inside, he is still totally Chinese-- too timorous to make his real feelings known.

"So, what do you think of the idea?" says the younger Mo.

"What does this have to do with me? Ask Yishan."

"Well, in my opinion," Yishan's father cuts in, "she needs a rest since she's just gotten back from a trip."

Yishan brings in a slice of watermelon and hands it to Tianlei, her mother following her with a tray of treats.

"Where have you been?" says Yishan. "Your sister just called looking for you."

"Excuse me, Yishan," interrupts Older Mo. "What do you say to coming on the tour with us?"

Yishan's eyes turn to scan Tianlei, who, pretending not to notice it, lowers his head and eats the watermelon in his hands, his fingers clutching it tightly. Before Tianlei came, Yishan, though not impressed by Older Mo's looks, had never thought he was ugly. But after she met Tianlei, she became more critical of Older Mo's appearance. She began to think his skin was coarse, his body fat, his eyes narrow, and his lips thick. If Tianlei would only look at her once, she would not have any second thoughts about turning down Mo's invitation. But seeing that Tianlei takes no notice of her, she becomes angry inside and, with a deliberate smile on her face, says to Older Mo, "Can I think this over?"

"Certainly," replies the chubby man as he stands up. "I'll call you tomorrow or stop by to find out what you have

decided." Turning to Tianlei, he adds, "Good-bye, Mr. Moe. Eat that melon slowly. Don't choke on it."

After the Mo brothers' departure, Yishan's parents say they need to go and visit a friend, and they ask Tianlei to stay for supper. Tianlei accompanies them to the door and, upon returning to the living room, continues with his watermelon. Yishan, perplexed by Tianlei's slight, orders Ah-xiu to clear the table. She sits down on the couch and leafs through a magazine noisily. When he finishes his watermelon, Tianlei goes to wash his hands. Returning to his sofa, he lights up a cigarette. Neither he nor Yishan wants to be the first to break the silence. Finally, Yishan, with a tone of reproach, begins, "Where have you been for the past several days?"

"I'd like to know how they knew where you lived," says Tianlei coldly.

"I told them," Yishan replies. "Do you mind?"

"I've been visiting with my old friends these past few days," says Tianlei. "Why? Do you have any objections to that?"

"All right, then remember, Tianlei, what I do is none of your business, either." Initially she thought Tianlei was going to apologize to her for having not contacted her after the trip while she waited every day at home for his call. Now that she is really hurt by his attitude toward her, she rises, throws her hair back, and warns Tianlei: "I'm going to call them right now and tell them I'm going to go. And don't

you tell me what I should or should not do!"

She goes to the telephone and watches Tianlei's reaction. He does not respond. She picks up the receiver and dials a couple of numbers. He still does not react. She snaps the phone back and, standing still, begins to cry, streaks of tears falling on her dress. Rising, Tianlei walks up to her and holds her in his arms. They kiss, and she later explains that she had never given her address or phone number to the Mos; they found it out on their own. That's all Tianlei wants to hear, and whatever she says after that totally escapes his hearing. They stand by the telephone kissing, rediscovering the depths of their mutual love.

The phone rings. It is Yishan's mother. She calls to say they won't be able to come home for dinner, and she wants Yishan to take good care of her guest. She hangs up the phone with a big grin on her face, wondering if her parents' eating at a friend's was planned or a coincidence. Tianlei is also in a better mood as the two of them spend the rest of the afternoon and evening on the couch. Ah-xiu, trying to hold back her giggles with her hand on her mouth, turns on the light in the dining room and announces that their dinner is ready. The two come and sit down at the table facing one another, enjoying the four dishes and the new, relaxed atmosphere between them.

After the meal, they take a walk along Benevolence Boulevard, all the way to the Taipei Hospital, where the

streets are nearly deserted. Behind the hospital, a big house is under construction. On the ground are steel rods, cement, a concrete mixer, and a large pile of bricks. Picking up some bricks and making them into a bench, Tianlei sits down with Yishan. Far away on the street, a few people sitting on benches wait patiently for a bus, their eyes looking ahead, their heads turning uniformly each time a car passes by. The road is wide but the streetlights are dim. The houses in this area are at a comfortable distance from each other, and very few people can be seen on the street. Tianlei now realizes there are also quiet neighborhoods in Taipei.

"We could actually buy a house here--maybe even this one they're building right now," says Tianlei. "Then I'll get a bicycle so I can ride to work, and since this place is so close to your parents' house, you can go visit them whenever you get bored. And in the evening we can take a bus to Ximending or. . . ."

"What are you talking about?" Yishan interrupts, a trace of confusion and repugnance in her eyes. "What are you trying to say exactly?"

"I'm just saying we could get married and live here," replies Tianlei, his eyes gazing ahead to avoid hers.

"I don't know what you mean," Yishan says and stares angrily at him.

"Yishan, oh, Yishan." He calls out her name as if she were not around. "Please listen to me, I've already made the

decision to stay, at least for a while, perhaps a year. I don't know exactly how long but I have decided to stay," Tianlei says, his eyes still peering ahead. "During all these years I was abroad, the only thing I wanted every day was to come home. I felt as if my whole body were tied up with rope, and, with each year passing, the rope became tighter and tighter. But I knew I could be set free someday, and I kept waiting for that day to come. Finally my dream came true, and the ropes around me were taken off, but it takes time for the marks to heal. Do you understand? All I'm asking is to wait till I'm recovered before sending me back. Yishan, I really want to have a chance to relax mentally and physically for a while."

"I'm still confused as to what point you're trying to make," Yishan says. "I know a person can have anything he wants in America. How can life there be like what you say?"

"You are right in that you can have a lot of things in that country, and it is precisely those things that lie like a dead weight on your back and suffocate you. What I need is some fresh air, and nothing else."

A bus rattles down the road. As it stops, the people on the benches rise, stretch themselves, and proceed to get on. A man spits on the ground before boarding and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. When the bus roars away, the street is silent again.

Tianlei turns to look at Yishan, sensing her discontent

and vexation from the look in her eyes and the expression on her face. He turns his eyes away from her and holds her in his arms. "Yishan, I beg you to stay here with me after we get married, even if it's only for a year. I don't know how to explain to you why I want to stay. You can think of it any way you want--say I don't want to leave home or be away from my parents. As long as you'll go along with me now on this, we may even consider going to the United States in a year."

Yishan, withdrawing from Tianlei's arms, gazes at him with a disappointed look. "No, no way," she bursts out, the no in her eyes even more stubborn. "If you want us to get married, you have to take me to the States right away. For so many years, all I've dreamed about is going abroad. I can't stand living in a small place like this any more, or seeing the same old faces every day. I'm bored to death! I want to see what the world outside Taiwan is like. If that means suffering, I'm willing to experience it. The only thing I can take no longer is being pinned down here and living this boring life. I need some fresh air to breathe. Tell me, is this asking for too much? Just about every one of my college classmates has gone abroad. Sure, they write back and complain how lonely they are, but none of them, not a single one, has come back. They're just like birds that finally got out of their cage--they'll never return. The world outside is so immense and I just want to have a look. Why can't you understand me?"



"Yishan, did you ever stop to think the world outside could be another cage?"

"No. Even if it is, I want to find it out for myself. I wish you weren't so egotistic. You've already spent ten years outside and now you're tired of it, so you don't think anything is worth seeing for me, either. I call that selfishness."

"I'm not trying to stop you from going," says Tianlei. "All I'm asking of you is to stay in your so-called cage a bit longer, and I'm coming in to be with you."

"No, that's going to make it more suffocating for me. I want you, I beg you, to take me out. Tianlei, ever since I was in grade school I've always wanted to have a look at the other side of the Pacific Ocean. Is that unreasonable?"

Tianlei, hesitating to call it that, does not respond.

Yishan steps forward and, with all her might, clutches Tianlei--her passport to going abroad. "Please, take me to where you've lived for ten years. You promised me that the other day when we had lunch on the train, remember?" As she gazes intently at his face, her eyes glisten at the prospect of crossing the ocean and seeing Niagara Falls, Yellowstone Park, and all the other sights. "After I get there, if I find life too hard as you say it is, we can both come back. I promise I will come with you then. How's that? Tianlei, for all these years I've only had one wish. If you truly love me, you will grant my wish, won't you? So, when are we leaving?"

In September?"

A gust of wind blows Yishan's hair away from her face, revealing the soft skin of her face unscarred by wrinkles of sorrow or loneliness, her sparkling eyes that clearly indicate she has never been through any major sorrow or disappointment in life, her ears that have heard nothing but compliments, her cheeks that have seldom been streaked with tears, and her lips that know the magic of a lovely smile. In the dim moonlight, her face becomes even more charming, and Tianlei cannot bring himself to letting her down for the first time in her life.

"All right, September will be fine," he says.

Yishan throws herself into Tianlei's arms, her face beaming with happiness, her body slightly quivering with excitement. He holds her tightly, feeling the warmth of her body.

As Tianlei walks Yishan home, she urges him to go faster; she cannot wait to tell her parents their long-awaited news. "We don't need to have a big wedding ceremony, but I do want a Western one," she says. "I think my father should be able to make a reservation at the Friends of China Club since he is a member. Instead of a traditional banquet, I want a completely Western meal served, followed by a reception with coffee and refreshments. Then at midnight we'll show an American movie like a lot of people do. How does that sound?" Hearing no response, she slows down and turns to look at him. "Hey, are you there? I'm discussing our wedding plans with you."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he says, looking into her eyes.

"I'm not talking to you again. You're always so absent-minded." She pretends to be angry and quickens her steps. At the entrance to her house, she says, "Why don't you go home right away and let your parents know, too? I'm sure they'll talk this over with my parents. Give me a call tomorrow, okay?"

He nods, forgets to kiss her good-bye or to open the gate for her, and leaves. On his way home, the only question in his mind is how he is going to explain his new decision to Professor Chiu.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The moment he steps into the yard, Tianlei hears noises inside the house. They must have company, although he cannot discern who the guests are. Creeping past his parents' bedroom to the kitchen door, he sees Ah-cui chatting with his neighbor's maid. He gestures her not to give him away and, taking his shoes off, he slips past the storage room and the bathroom into his bedroom and closes the door. The small room is so hot and stuffy it is almost like the middle of the summer. He takes off his soaked shirt and slacks, turns on the lamp on his desk, and sits down on the floor in front of the small oscillating fan. Sounds of laughter come now and then from the living room, but he is not interested in finding out who the visitors are. He would rather have Ah-cui bring his sister here to talk. There are many things he wants to discuss with her, not the least of which is how he is going to explain his change of plans to Mr. Chiu. He knows his sister would say, as anybody else would: "Oh, my God, you're so indecisive. You can never make up your mind." Perhaps the only person who can truly understand him is Jiali. Yes, Jiali. But how can he still be thinking about her when he is about to marry Yishan! He reaches for Yishan's picture on his desk and gazes at it. The eyes in the picture are looking hopefully at him. It is the same look she had a while ago on Benevolence Boulevard when she begged him to take her to the

United States. He still remembers how she threw herself into his arms when he agreed. Since he will return to the United States sooner or later, he may as well go sooner if that is what it will take to win her heart. As for explaining to Mr. Chiu, Tianlei is sure the professor can understand a man's willingness to make certain sacrifices for his lady friend; Mr. Chiu is an open-minded man and, in fact, quite Westernized in his thoughts. Tianlei is sure he can always come back here at a later time to help him with his journal and teach at his alma mater--it's just a matter of time. If he actually stayed in Taiwan now, he would, in all likelihood, lose Yishan--and what he has hoped for through the years. No, this must not happen. Mr. Chiu can certainly understand and sympathize with him.

He nods and smiles at Yishan's picture. Suddenly a burst of laughter explodes outside his door. He jumps up from the floor, almost tipping over the fan, and rushes out of his room. Facing him are Tianmei laughing uncontrollably, his parents and Yishan's, all standing in the hallway smiling at him.

"Aren't you going to put a pair of pants on and come out?" says Tianmei, still laughing.

He retreats to his room in a hurry, murmuring, "Why didn't you. . .?"

"Your light was on," says Tianmei to her brother, "and I was wondering why, since I knew you had gone out, so I decided

to check it out. When I looked in the window of your door, I saw you smiling and nodding at Yishan's picture, so I invited everyone to come and see a free show."

"Tianlei," his mother calls out, "aren't you coming out? Don't pay any attention to what your sister says. It was Ah-cui that told us you were back. Your uncle and aunt Chen are here. Yishan has called, too."

That explains all that noise in the living room. "How long have Yishan's parents been here?" he asks Tianmei.

"They were here for supper, and it was supposed to be a chance for you to ask their permission to marry their daughter," says Tianmei, trying to hold back her giggles. "I heard that when you went to Yishan's home, you met a rival there. Mrs. Chen told us you were so upset your face turned red and you kept biting into the watermelon and almost ate the skin, too. Is that true?"

"I wouldn't elevate that scoundrel Mo to the status of rival. He's just a shameless pest."

"If he wasn't your rival, why would you call him a pest? As a matter of fact, you should go and thank Mo. If it hadn't been for him, Yishan's father says, who knows how much longer you would have waited, you odd ball."

"He really said that?"

"Yeah, except that I added 'odd ball'."

Tianlei, pretending to be angry, swats his sister on the back of her head and says, "You little devil."

"So, is everything settled between the two of you?" says Tianmei, putting on a serious air as she closes the door. "Yishan called her parents here as soon as she got home and said you two had agreed on everything and were now ready to send out wedding invitations. She also said you two were going to the States together this September. Is that true?" As she looks into his eyes, he does not deny what she has just said. "Maybe it's not such a bad idea after all," she adds.

"I had no other choice," says Tianlei. "I know I've made a promise to Mr. Chiu, but Yishan finally changed my mind." He wanted to tell his sister what Yishan had said to him, but on second thought he decided not to, since she, like Yishan, has also spent her entire life in this small world. Tianmei, for some reason, doesn't seem to be eager to go abroad. Even if she had once wanted to, it is no longer a priority in her life. "I guess I'll just go," he continues. "Perhaps I'll come back in a few years and stay longer then."

"Like I said, it may not be a bad idea, but how are you going to break the news to Mr. Chiu?"

"That's exactly what I wanted to talk with you about."

"Tianlei," his mother calls, "what are you two talking about? The news is already out, so don't be so shy anymore, groom-to-be. Come out now. Aren't you hot in there?"

Tianlei, winking at his sister, says, "We'll have to talk later," and goes out, buttoning his shirt on his way to the living room where the two sets of parents turn to look at him

with broad smiles. Their attention makes him a bit self-conscious, so after greeting Yishan's parents, he sits down next to his mother and sips the soda Ah-cui has just brought him.

"There's hardly a month left," says Mr. Chen to Tianlei's mother. "Are we going to have enough time to arrange everything for the wedding?"

"Maybe the arrangements don't have to be so elaborate."

"But I'm not sure if Yishan is going to be willing to settle for that. She insists that I reserve the Friends of China Club for the wedding, and she wants to host a ball afterwards. She's got so many wonderful plans but she can't do anything herself. In the past few days she's suddenly come up with the idea that she should learn to cook, so she follows me around the kitchen all the time. She hasn't learned how to make a thing but she's got several burns on her hands. I'm just worried how she's going to handle things when she leaves us."

"That you don't have to worry about," says Tianlei's mother. "When she's home, she has her parents to rely on, but when she's on her own, she'll learn quite quickly. When Tianmei was with us, she didn't even know how to make a cup of tea herself; she just didn't know if you should put tea in the cup first or pour water in first. But look at her now. She's become quite skillful at cooking and can even make some Western dishes. We've tasted them."



"Tianlei, when you have time tomorrow, prepare a list of wedding guests," says his father. "We've already decided: your wedding is going to be on September 12. I've looked in the almanac; it's going to be a lucky day."

My own wedding?! Tianlei has run across the word "wedding" a number of times in his correspondence with his family and Yishan and, since he came back, has heard it numerous times as well, but now the familiar word is going beyond just a comfortable prospect--it is soon to become a reality, and what he conjures up in his mind is a completely different picture, a picture of what might have been. In the photograph are himself and his love Meili. There are only three weeks, twenty-one days to be exact, left, and after that he will have an entirely different identity, live a different sort of life, and have different goals. His whole life will be changed by this event. What will it be like to be married? he can't help wondering. "Is it going to be that soon, Dad?" he asks in total bewilderment.

"You silly kid, do we have any choice?" says Tianlei's mother.

"You don't need to worry anyhow, Tianlei," says Mrs. Chen. "We'll take care of everything. You and Yishan can just go on having fun as usual. There are lots of places worth seeing in and around Taipei. Yishan can take you to all those places. When you get tired, you can just come home and ask your mother to cook some delicious dishes for you. All you

need to do is put on your wedding suit on the twelfth and go to the wedding."

"I think it would be best to make it simple. I don't want you to go to a lot of bother," says Tianlei. "One thing more, I don't want the press to be at the wedding and bother us."

"Well, getting married is a big event," says Mr. Chen. "We can't make it too simple."

"Why are you worried about the press?" says Mrs. Chen. "If they want to come, simply let them. When your friend Mr. Mo came back, I heard his family telephoned the newspapers and even held a press conference! You've spent so many hard years abroad earning your Ph.D. and now it's your chance for some publicity. Why would you want to shy away from it?"

"I'm not shying away," Tianlei says, puffing heavily on his cigarette.

"Well, Tianlei has a point, too," his mother cuts in. "We'll all be so busy at that time. Who's going to have the time to deal with reporters?" Turning toward the kitchen, she calls, "Ah-cui, we need some more soda."

"Oh, that won't be necessary," says Yishan's mother. "And we ought to be going pretty soon. It's so hot this evening I'm afraid we are going to have a thunderstorm."

After some more soda and talk about the wedding, the Chens are ready to leave. Before she goes out the door, Mrs. Chen says to Tianlei, "When Yishan called and told me the news, I was so happy and excited. I don't mean to brag about my

daughter, but Yishan is a good girl, and she really likes you a lot, although sometimes she does act like a child. I'm sure the two of you will have a happy life together. I can really entrust my daughter to you."

Her words of faith deeply touch Tianlei. "Thank you so much, Mrs. Chen," he says. "I'll certainly take good care of Yishan."

As soon as they leave, Tianlei asks his sister to come to his room. He wants her to help him prepare what he is going to say to Mr. Chiu. "I think it would be better to let him know of my change of plans as early as possible," he says, lighting up another cigarette. "It's going to be awkward, I know, since I just told him and the department chairman yesterday that I would teach two courses for them this fall. The worst thing is that Mr. Chiu has really set his mind on running the literary journal with me. He's been looking for the right person for quite some time, and when I told him I was going to stay, he was so excited. Now my change of plans is going to be a big blow to him. That's why I don't know how to tell him. Also, as you know, he's been really kind to me ever since I entered the university, so my decision to stay was partly an expression of gratitude. Now that you know where I'm coming from, can you help me think of a good way to get myself out?"

Tianmei picks up a pencil from the desk and chews on the end of it as was her custom when she worked on her physics

home assignments. "This is going to be tough, especially when you consider he's such a nice person. Oh, by the way, I almost forgot to tell you, he called you twice this evening. He said he needed to discuss something with you."

"Really? When did he call?"

"After supper. I answered the phone both times. I even joked with him. I asked him when we should expect an invitation to his wedding. He said now that you were here, it should be soon. He said for sure you would find a good woman for him."

"I don't think he plans ever to get married," says Tianlei. "What a shame. He's such a nice man, so educated, and he knows what he wants out of life. Women somehow don't see his strengths. Anyway, I hope you'll come up with a good explanation for me. I'm going to see him first thing in the morning because the longer I hold off on this, the tougher it's going to be for me to tell him."

The phone rings. Tianmei rises to answer it. Hearing no voice in the house, she gathers that her parents have already gone to bed, so she walks on tiptoe into the living room. Tianlei, thinking that it may be Mr. Chiu, follows his sister. He turns on the light and notices Tianmei's hand that holds the receiver shaking as she says, "All right. Sure. I'll tell him right away." Seeing her face turning pale and her lips quivering, he knows something bad must have happened. He also starts shaking.

"What . . . what happened?"

She hangs up the telephone and turns around stiffly, her eyes staring straight ahead. Tianlei becomes worried and walks up to hold her in his arms.

"What's the matter? Tell me. You're not sick, are you?" She shakes her head, and he continues, "Then tell me what happened. Who was on the phone?"

"I don't know," she replies.

"You don't know? Then why are you acting like this? Don't play tricks with me. You've got to help me find a way to explain to Mr. Chiu."

"Mr. Chiu . . . he . . . he got hit by a motorcycle."

"What? Don't kid me!" He pushes her away, but seeing the horrified expression on her face, he knows she is not joking. He grabs her and fixes her with his eyes. "What did you just say?"

"The man who just called said Mr. Chiu got hit by motorcycle and is now in the emergency room at Taiwan University Hospital. He wants you to go there immediately."

"Is this real? How can this be happening?" He starts screaming and staring at Tianmei, as if she were the driver that caused the accident. "Tell me how it happened."

"The man said he saw Mr. Chiu walking toward a mail drop and then he was hit by a motorcycle. He saw your name on the envelope, so he called to let you know."

"Oh, my God! How could this happen!" He screams at the

top of his lungs as he shakes Tianmei's arms violently. Seeing her brother losing control, she starts to cry, her tears falling onto the floor.

"Stop shaking me! Please!" she begs him as she tries to free herself from his hold. Seeing him breathe heavily, she holds him tightly and says, "Tianlei, don't be like this. Come on, stop. I'll go to the hospital with you."

The emergency room is crowded and the lights seem dim. Tianlei, holding his sister's hand, tries to make his way through the crowd. As he approaches the front, a man comes up, takes his hand, and starts leading him in the opposite direction.

"Don't look," says the chairman of Mr. Chiu's department at the university. "Don't go close."

Tianlei pulls his hand away and, as if he did not hear what was said, continues to go forward. On the bed lies a person under a white sheet, with blood stains showing through about the neck.

Tianlei remembers the smile on Mr. Chiu's face when they had lunch together. As they were eating noodles spiced with hot sauce, Mr. Chiu told him all he wanted out of life was eating the kinds of food he liked, reading kung fu novels, managing a good literary journal, and being among his friends. He was such an honest man, and his needs were so modest. He was always strict with himself but kind and compassionate to people around him. Why did he have to be the one to meet with

this great misfortune? Tianlei walks up next to the bed and lifts the sheet. The man's face is so badly smashed it is almost impossible to distinguish his features. Is this really the Mr. Chiu that talked and laughed with him during lunch?

"This can't be him," he murmurs to himself. "It must all have been a mistake."

No one responds to him. He turns and walks out of the room without a word, passing the department chairman who stands by the door waiting to speak to him. Outside the hospital, he spots a police car on the street. He has never felt so miserable. With one hand on his chest, he is led by his sister across the street and into a taxi. Once inside the cab, Tianmei hands him a letter that the department chairman gave to her. He can tell from the familiar, deft handwriting on the envelope that it is from Mr. Chiu. Tears suddenly slip from the corners of his eyes, and he buries his face in his hands. Tianmei's eyes are also moist as she sits quietly next to him, pondering on the tremendous sorrow her brother must be feeling and on how unjustly a good person like Mr. Chiu has been treated by life.

By the time they reach home, the letter is wet with his tears. He goes into his room alone, shuts the door, and opens it:

Dear Tianlei,

I was so excited after our talk tonight that I went

and got more wine and cold cuts and am enjoying them alone right now. You know what's good about drinking by yourself? Well, you can read a kung fu novel while slouching in your chair or on your bed. You can even put your feet up on the desk and drop a peanut in your mouth after each sip. You should start reading kung fu novels. They are fantastic. The good ones have a succinct style and the stories will put you in a different world. Even the bad characters are interesting because they are bad in a "wholesome" way. When I was in the U.S., I met some Chinese students, mostly science majors, who were so crazy about kung fu novels that they even ordered them from Hong Kong. It was so funny to see how desperately they waited for their books to arrive. Now when I come to think about what you said, I believe you have a point--people read such things because they need an escape from reality and also because they are lazy. In other words, they want to get away from the complicated real world where fighting cannot solve all their problems, and they are too lazy to think up ways to solve their problems. So I guess the two explanations are essentially one. I also agree with you that kung fu stories cannot be classified as true literature, just as good storytellers aren't all writers. But I want to add a point: kung fu itself is an art, no matter at what level.



Now, back to the subject we discussed earlier. I would like to see the journal change from a quarterly to a bimonthly; this way we can introduce more quality international literature to our readers. As far as translation is concerned, I can get help from the students in my American literature class. I would like you to be in charge of soliciting manuscripts, especially from overseas writers. This kind of writing will help readers get a true picture of what other countries are like, and I think that is an important task. Frankly, I cannot think of anyone more qualified for this job. Another area that I want to tackle is literary criticism. It is an area that is demanding yet oftentimes underappreciated, but it is a challenging field. For the past several years I've always wanted to learn more about it, but because of lack of time and financial support (or perhaps my laziness), I haven't been able to. What I hope to see is a foundation on which we can build a system. Of course, I can't dream of doing everything that Edmund Wilson or other prominent literary critics have done, but at least we can get started. It's sad that many of our writers are so complacent with their success that they want to hear nothing but compliments about their works.

But I must warn you beforehand: managing a journal is no easy task, especially for a purely literary one like

ours, whose readership is not the general public. We will probably encounter problems with subscriptions and getting advertisements, so besides putting in a lot of time and effort, we may even have to invest some personal savings into it. If we can sell five hundred copies of each issue, I'll be very satisfied, and your only reward at that time would be knowing that you have that many readers. For me, that's plenty of reward. Hawthorne once said: the greatest pleasure of writing is writing itself. Secondary to that is appreciation and encouragement from your family and friends. The last thing you would expect from it is money. I think that perfectly fits our situation, or, for that matter, anything you truly care to do.

It's going to take some time to prepare for the first issue, which I tentatively target for distribution in January (or is that too late?). When the journal comes out, I will be like its mother, and you'll be, figuratively speaking, its nurse. (But doesn't a nurse have to suckle the baby for three years?) To be frank with you, I am very happy about your decision to stay, because in addition to helping me with the journal, you'll help me personally as well. Sometimes I feel really lonely, so lonely that even kung fu stories can't get me out of it. So, besides feeling happy for you, I'm also happy for my own sake. I must be drunk now;

otherwise, I wouldn't be telling you all of this. You know, what I like the most about Kennedy is his ability to laugh at himself.

I've tried to call you several times but could never reach you. You must have been out on a date or something. Sometimes I am just amazed how intense young people's energy can be. Although you see me laugh all the time, inside I feel really old. When I see my students in class, I just feel like shouting to them: Don't you waste a minute of your time. Grab it! Grab every second of it before you get old. Tianlei, I also admire you and your good luck. By the way, have you had a chance to tell your decision to your girlfriend (or is it your fiancée)? Use some of that charm you have to convince her. She won't object. Why don't you bring her over sometime? I'll treat both of you to some more noodles like we had today. Well, I have to go now. My bottle is getting empty. I'll drop this letter off and try to get some sleep. Give me a call after you read this. I should be home in the next couple of days.

When we meet next time, the first thing I'd like to discuss with you is finding a meaningful name for our journal.

S.F. Chiu

P.S. The time of the day (12:00 midnight) reminds me of a line written by poet Dongpo Su when he came home one night drunk and couldn't get anyone to open the door for him: "I support myself with a cane, the sound of waves my only companion." How helpless he must have felt!

Tianlei, supporting himself with elbows on the desk, tries to control his emotions as he reads the letter over and over again. Each time he runs across the words "I feel really lonely . . . . I just feel like shouting to them: Don't waste a minute of your time," he imagines how desperately lonesome Mr. Chiu, without a family and living all by himself in a small apartment, must have felt. He has never seen him despondent in public. Now, for the first time in his life, Tianlei realizes how hard Mr. Chiu must have tried to hide his inner emotions. At the same time he, more than ever before, discovers Mr. Chiu's vitality and his desire to contribute to society.

He folds the letter and puts it in a new envelope. After wiping his face, he stands up, straightens his clothes, and fastens his belt. No longer able to sleep, he comes out of his room.

"Where are you going?" asks Tianmei, who sits alone in the dark living room.

"Out to take a walk."

"I'll go with you," she says. "I don't feel tired at all,

either."

He goes to the couch and sits on the armrest next to her. "Please don't," he says, lightly touching her hair. "You've had a hectic day, and when Xiao-rong wakes up in the morning you'll have to get up, too. Go and lie down. If you can't fall asleep right away, you should at least lie in bed and rest."

She reaches out her hand and grabs his thumb. A tear falls on the back of her hand.

"Everyone has to go sooner or later." She wants to say something to console her brother but can't.

"I know what you mean," he says. "What I don't understand is why it had to be him. There were still so many things, meaningful things, that he wanted to do."

"You can finish what he has left," she blurts out. As he thinks about what she has just said, they fall into silence. Finally, he rises. "Why don't you go to bed now? I'll go take a walk."

The street is already deserted. He walks with quick steps all the way to Mr. Chiu's apartment, where a lamp by the window is still on. The door is half-open, but he doesn't have the nerve to go in. He is not superstitious, but he cannot bring himself to the reality that Mr. Chiu is no longer in that room. If he stays outside, he can at least say to himself: Mr. Chiu did not die. All this is just a nightmare. He will call me tomorrow.

Suddenly the door opens and he starts, quickly covering his mouth with both hands. The department chairman comes out and, seeing a dark figure outside, is also startled.

"Is that you, Tianlei? Why are you still out at this hour?" He stands by the door, signaling Tianlei to come inside. But Tianlei shakes his head.

"All this happened so suddenly," says the chairman as he locks the door. "It is totally unexpected. He was the youngest professor in the department and he was so active. All his students loved him because he was so knowledgeable and friendly to everybody. That year when he went to the United States on a Ford Foundation scholarship, I thought I had lost another faculty member forever. But he returned right after he finished his research. I remember once asking him why he didn't stay abroad as other people had. He said he couldn't leave his home. Actually I know why he didn't. He just wanted to contribute all he could to the department. He had such a good relationship with his students, and he treated them like his own brothers and sisters. Of course you know you were his favorite student, don't you?"

Tianlei nods.

"The saddest part is he didn't have any close relatives. I just searched all over his room and all I found was the address of an uncle of his. I'm going to give that man a call tomorrow morning, and the department is going to send out funeral announcements. The wake is scheduled for three o'clock

tomorrow afternoon. I'd appreciate it if you could come a little early to help out."

Tianlei nods.

"Did you see that letter?" asks the chairman. "He went out to send it. . . ."

Tianlei, no longer able to control himself, runs toward the street. He stops a passing taxi and gets into the back seat and starts to cry. By the time the taxi stops, he has somewhat regained composure. Seeing his pale face, the driver asks kindly, "Sir, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Thank you."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

For several days following the wake, Tianlei was fully occupied and was unable to think about anything else.

Many people, a lot more than Tianlei had expected, came to the wake, including professors from other departments and colleges. Some bowed and left; others stayed for some time, shaking their heads as they observed in utter disbelief Mr. Chiu's rearranged countenance. Many of Mr. Chiu's former students also came, along with their spouses, signs of disbelief still lingering on their faces. Some of the students were Tianlei's classmates, and as they spoke with him, their faces were solemn, not because they were not happy to see Tianlei again but because they were still in a state of shock from the loss of a revered teacher. Among them were Pingtian Zhang and his wife. After bowing to Mr. Chiu's body, Pingtian came up to Tianlei and held his hands, his usually self-assured face full of rage.

"How could this ever happen? I still can't believe my eyes. Where's that guy?"

"Which guy?"

"The one that rode the motorcycle."

"I don't know."

"He should be locked up for the rest of his life or be executed."

"What good would that do to Mr. Chiu?" says Tianlei. "Even



if the guy were shot, that still wouldn't change the situation any."

Some of the mourners were Mr. Chiu's current students. The girls wept as they saw Mr. Chiu lying in the casket, some wiping their faces with handkerchiefs, others letting their tears fall. Although the boys did not cry, their adam's apples moved violently up and down and their brows were tightly knit as they tried to conceal their emotions. The scene reminded Tianlei of what Faulkner said in Light in August: a man can endure any amount of sorrow. Seeing the grief-stricken faces around him, Tianlei's heart became a knot, not only for those students, but also for himself, and all the others in the room. But he did not shed any more tears, even during the funeral at the Eternal Joy Cemetery on Peace Avenue South.

After the funeral, Tianlei starts helping sort out the letters, papers, and books in Mr. Chiu's office. Over the years, Mr. Chiu had accumulated various kinds of documents, which were scattered all over his small office. Every morning Tianlei rides a bike to the school and does not return home until late in the afternoon when he is totally exhausted. His family understands how he feels and thus lets him go in and out as he pleases. His sister returned to Tainan the fourth day after Mr. Chiu's accident and said she would come home again in early September. If Tianlei decides to return to the United States, she would like to spend a few more days with

him. If he decides to stay, then she will help her mother plan for the wedding. Yishan comes to visit him almost every day and stays for dinner. In the evening, they sometimes go to her favorite cafe or his favorite noodle house. The lady who owns the restaurant enjoys telling them about Mr. Chiu.

"Once I joked with Mr. Chiu," she says with a heavy Sichuan accent. "I asked him why he didn't marry a girl from Sichuan so he could eat this kind of noodles at home every day instead of coming here. He smiled and said, 'Why don't you find me one?' I said, 'I can, but there's one problem. Nine out of ten girls that I know don't read. They aren't good enough for you.' And he said, 'Why would that matter? As the saying goes, illiteracy is a virtue for women.' Then I asked him, 'You really don't mind having a wife that can't read?' He said, 'Absolutely.' So I went and found a girl for him. She was in her twenties and good-looking, and I arranged a date for them. Guess what happened--he didn't show up. Several days later he came in, and I asked him why he had stood her up. He smiled and said he felt too shy to meet her. Isn't it funny? A man his age and still so shy. All this seems to have happened just yesterday."

Tianlei listens with such a keen interest that he always wants to hear more. Sometimes he even stops by just for a chat. On the days he is with Yishan, he walks her home after their nights out. If he comes alone, he strolls home leisurely.

After sorting out things in Mr. Chiu's office, Tianlei offers to help pack things in Mr. Chiu's apartment. When he enters for the first time, a strong pipe smell still lingers in the room, and on the desk are empty wine bottles and plates, with tobacco spilled on the bed, the desk, and the floor. The sight almost creates the illusion that Mr. Chiu has just stepped outside and will return shortly. But the clock on the desk pointing to three tells Tianlei that the occupant is forever gone.

The first day he comes to the apartment he is unable to start sorting things, so he tells the department chairman he does not feel well and goes home. When he comes back the next day, the window is open, and the bottles and dishes are gone, along with the bedding. He spends the entire day packing Mr. Chiu's books and other belongings in boxes and moving them to the department.

When the room is emptied, he feels disoriented. He goes out to take a walk while the chairman gathers a crew to clean the place up. It is close to dusk. In the back of the building are weeds that have been withered by the day's strong sun. Beyond the weeds is a gravel path, one end leading to a street, the other a dead end. He stands below a huge palm tree, his body leaning against it, looking at the sunset and the faint red sky in the distance. It is cooler under the tree, although heat still comes up from the ground. He wonders how Berkeley must look now. When he lived there,

leaves were already on the ground by this time of the year, and the sun cast dark shadows through the bare trees lining the roads.

During the years he was in Berkeley, autumn was the season Tianlei hated the most, because it gave him a suffocating feeling. Once Jiali asked him whether he liked autumn, and he said no. She said to him, "This is my favorite season, because spring gives me a buoyant feeling that makes me unable to think clearly, summer is so hot I feel restless, and winter is so cold it makes my spirit low, but autumn is subtle and it makes one think deeply. Don't you agree? The autumn breeze is so soothing; it is not harshly cold, but cool, and it blows away all the distracting thoughts in your head. It may seem somewhat desolate and make you feel a little melancholy, but I feel a certain amount of melancholy adds to one's life experience. It's as if you see a person laugh, you know he is happy about something, and you are not likely to be particularly affected by it; at the most, you would feel happy for him. But if you see a person cry, your reaction is completely different. If you have a kind heart, you will feel for the person, and you will want to find out what he is grieving over, and in the process you discover new things about him. Don't you agree?"

A certain amount of melancholy adds to one's life experience? Tianlei thinks to himself as he watches the vehicles and pedestrians on the street. Wouldn't life be much

more pleasant without any bleakness? If a person never experiences any desolate or hollow feelings, and if he simply views life and death as natural phases of a cycle, wouldn't his life be much simpler? Why bother with all the perplexities of life?

He strolls along the road toward the school. The sun has gone down but the moon has not emerged, leaving the sky a shade of dark gray. The two rows of palm trees along the school's front gate seem all the more straight at this time of day. Those palms have such different characteristics from the bushes next to them. While the bushes are clustered together, one clinging to another, the palms are solitary and independent. Wasn't Mr. Chiu like a palm? Tianlei thinks to himself. He did not stay abroad because others did, and he did not get married simply because he needed a family. He did what he thought was right for himself, and his life, though lonely, was a truly fulfilling one, because he was independent. He ambles back and forth under the palms, thinking about Mr. Chiu, himself, and his promises to himself in this same place ten years ago.

Finally he lets out a deep breath, and his mind begins to ease up.

"Hello, Tianlei, I didn't expect to find you here," says the chairman as he walks over. "All his things have been moved out."

"Then I should be going home now."

"Why in such a rush? Why don't you come over to my house and have supper with us? You've been a great help to me for the past several days. Without you, I wouldn't have known where to start."

"I didn't do anything more than I should have," says Tianlei. "Thank you for inviting me, but I must not trouble you any more."

"Well, in that case, why don't we go over to my office and have a chat? There are a few things I'd like to talk with you about."

"Can we talk here? I think I know what you want to discuss with me."

"Yes, I figure you guessed it." After a short pause, he adds, "What I'd like to say is that since Mr. Chiu is no longer here, perhaps you may want to change your mind about staying. If that's the case, please feel free to do so. I would understand."

"No," Tianlei says. "I want to stay. Mr. Chiu's departure makes me more. . . ."

"Tianlei, you really want to?" The chairman can hardly believe his ears.

"Yes. I decided just now, when I was standing right here." He raises his head and glances at the palm trees, as if he wants to thank them for helping him make the decision and to ask them to be a witness.

The chairman, grasping Tianlei's right hand so tightly that

he almost cuts off the circulation, says excitedly, "That's terrific! That is absolutely terrific! This is something I've been dreaming about for the past couple of days, but I didn't think it was going to happen. I'm sure if Mr. Chiu were still here and knew of your decision, he would be very happy and grateful. Oh, by the way, do you have other plans besides teaching the two courses?"

"Actually I do," says Tianlei after a short pause. "Mr. Chiu always wanted to run a pure literary journal. We've already worked out many details. I'd like to continue with the plan."

"Wonderful. Mr. Chiu has mentioned that to me, too. If you need any assistance with that, just let me know."

On his way home, Tianlei feels relieved but at the same time heavy-hearted. He shakes his head, trying to replace the scene of the empty apartment with thoughts of the department chairman's excitement. The chairman also asked him to feel free to use Mr. Chiu's office or take home as many of his books as he could use. Those would be plenty of reference material, but how could they all fit in his small room, unless his parents would let him...? Suddenly, the thought of his parents worries him. How is he going to explain his new decision to them? Even if they did not object, would Yishan understand it and still want to marry him?

The moment he gets home, his mother greets him at the door.

"Finally, it's over," he says as he takes off his shoes.

"Thank God. You've been running around for two whole weeks now. You've even lost some weight. You should rest for a few days and then start planning for yourself."

Instead of responding, he goes into the living room, where his father is reading a newspaper in his wicker chair. Hearing Tianlei coming in, he puts the paper down on his lap and, looking at him over the top of his spectacles, says, "Are you all done?"

"Yes, except some letters that I have to write for him, but that doesn't have to be right away. The major part is over," he says as he wipes his face with a towel Ah-cui has handed to him.

Picking up his paper, his father says, "Actually they should have asked other people for help since you have so many of your own things to take care of."

"I went because I wanted to," says Tianlei. "Mr. Chiu was always so kind to me."

"Just don't overdo it. You look tired. You need a rest," says his mother. "Yishan just called. She'll be over after dinner. Do you want to eat something now or do you want to wait for dinner?"

"I'm not hungry." He finished his tea in one swallow, as if to boost his courage, and says, "Dad, Mom, I have something to tell you."

His father sets his paper on the tea table, takes off his



glasses, and looks curiously at him. His mother sits down on the couch facing him. Seeing their serious expressions, Tianlei says with a smile, "Actually it's nothing major. It's just that I'm not planning to return to the U.S. this year."

"What?" His father sits up right away and gazes at his face.

"Before I left, I had already asked for a year's sabbatical leave. At first, the school didn't want to give it to me, but I told them I needed to gather some teaching material, so they gave me permission. I wasn't planning on going back this fall anyway." Seeing his father's stern look, he adds before getting interrupted, "There are a number of reasons why I want to stay for a year. First of all, it's not so easy to come home. Since I've already spent all the traveling expenses, and I have permission to be away for a full year, I might as well take advantage of the opportunity. Secondly, the school here really wants me to teach for them for a year or two, and I can teach any course I like, so that works out well. Third, I've lived abroad for so long and I miss home, so I don't want to leave again right away. Fourth, life here is a lot more relaxed, plus I still get paid half of my salary over there but I can spend it here. . . ."

"That's enough, Tianlei." His father, no longer able to listen, stands up and walks over to him. "Let me ask you something. Have you discussed this with Yishan?"

"No, I haven't," Tianlei says, raising his head to look at

his father.

"Then do you think she would still want to marry you if she knew you had changed your plans?"

"I don't see why she wouldn't."

"You're dreaming!" his father explodes and stomps back to his seat and, with a sharp snap, opens the paper to cover his face.

"Tianlei, I'm confused," his mother says. "We've already planned for your wedding in September and afterwards both of you will go to the States together. How can you change your mind now? I think you're being a little rash. You must feel guilty about Mr. Chiu's death because he went out to mail the letter to you, right? If you think you should stay because of that, then you're being childish. No one can control his own fate. If a person is. . . ."

"Mother, this has nothing to do with Mr. Chiu's death. I had already told him I was going to stay."

"You did?" his father exclaims. "Then why didn't you tell us so? Why haven't you even told your own parents until now?"

"Because I never finally decided. When I spoke about this with Yishan last time, she wasn't hot on the idea, so I stopped pursuing it. But Mr. Chiu's death has made me realize life is too short to worry about everything. A person ought to do what his heart tells him to, and right now what I want is not to go back." In the dim light, he can see his mother's face growing pale, so he adds, "If I stay temporarily, it's

good for the department, and I've also kept my promise to Mr. Chiu. On top of that, I want to." He rises, walks up to his mother, and sits down on the armrest next to her. "Mom, I know that deep down inside you want me to be around longer, but you don't say so because you're scared that Yishan might leave me. Also, you're afraid that our friends and relatives may laugh at us and think I don't want to go back because I'm not doing well in the U.S. You may also be concerned about my future, especially when you read stories in the paper about a few people's successes or how much money they've made overseas. I'm not saying it's wrong for parents to expect their children to be successful; I know it is common and it involves family pride. But I can promise you, as far as Yishan is concerned, I'll try my best to convince her to stay with me. If my attempt fails in the end, I'll just have to look for someone else. Fortunately, I'm not over the hill yet. If friends and relatives want to laugh at me, simply let them. I don't know of a set formula to measure whether a person is successful or not. If someone thinks he is, someone else may be even more successful. I think as long as a person tries to do the best he can in advancing himself, he will achieve what he deserves. The only reason you want me to remain in the U.S. is because you want me to become a huge success, but there is one thing you've ignored, and that is, I am not happy there. If I don't feel happy, I can't set my mind to doing anything. The worst part is I'm not teaching

what I want to teach, so I just feel like I'm wasting my time. That is why I want to have a change and do what my heart desires: teach my own people and live a simple and worry-free life. For me, it's going to be like a vacation. I don't think my mom and dad would object to my taking a vacation, would they?" His words were so factual, his reasons so ample, that not only is his mother moved, but his father's expression has also softened. Putting his paper down once again, he lights a Cuban cigar Tianlei has brought for him. The dark room is soon filled with its aroma.

"Tianlei, I do see your point," says his father. "Like you said, all we want is for you to be happy. To be successful is also important, but it is secondary. All these years you've worked hard over there by yourself and we knew your life wasn't as good as you said in your letters, and that's why we were worried about you and started looking for a companion for you. We knew that if you had a family, then things would be different. So we found Yishan, and the two of you got along so well. Your mother and I were finally relieved thinking that you two could rely on each other and face life together. But you suddenly changed your plan, and that upset all ours, too."

"Dad, as for Yishan, I believe I can convince her."

Shaking his head, his father adds, "I know much better than you do what Yishan and her parents want from you."

"Chengmin," his mother cuts in. "I think we can go to the

Chens and let them know Tianlei wants to stay temporarily and see what their reactions are."

"Is it just temporary?" his father asks him.

After a long pause, Tianlei says, "I'm not sure myself, and that's why we can't tell them that. We don't want to give them false hopes."

"Have you ever brought this up to Yishan?" his mother asks.

"Yes, I have, but she didn't like the idea. She said she wanted to go to the United States not for material comfort or a great career, that she just didn't want to go through her entire life living in one place. She said she'd be happy to come back here after she had personally experienced setbacks in America; then she wouldn't complain about life here anymore."

"And you think she was asking for too much?" says his father.

"No, her thinking now is just like mine when I was at her stage: Everybody else was going abroad, so why shouldn't I? I wouldn't call that totally unreasonable."

"Then how do you plan to convince her to stay?" asks his mother.

"I can't promise I'll be able to, but I'll try my best."

"What if she won't go along?" his father asks.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what if she wouldn't agree to marry you because of that?"

Tianlei rubs his chin while his mother adds, "Is there any chance you may change your mind for her sake?"

He shakes his head, his fingers still rubbing the same spot.

"Defong, have the invitations been sent out yet?" his father asks.

Just when she is about to answer, Ah-cui comes in and announces that dinner is ready, although they are no longer in a mood to eat. After the meal, Tianlei, afraid that his parents may bring up the subject again, says he feels tired and goes to his room. He closes the door, turns on the fan, and lies down with his clothes on, trying his best to go to sleep. But no matter how hard he tries, he cannot fall asleep. He opens his eyes, and thousands of questions flash before him. What should I do? he asks himself. Even though his parents are not altogether happy, they have at least accepted the fact that he is not returning this fall. But how is he going to explain to Yishan? Although in front of his parents he appears to care little about whether Yishan is going to marry him or not, in his heart he does care. In fact, he cares a lot, because he likes her and values the bond that has developed between them over the years of correspondence. She is innocent and kind, and he wants her to be his wife. At first he thought she was childish and vain, but at that time he was sure she wanted him. Now that he is no longer so confident, her shortcomings have ceased to

be obstacles in their relationship.

If he told her he would only stay for one year, she would probably still agree to marry him. But what if he later decided to stay longer, or forever? How would he explain to her then? He turns and buries his face in the summer sleeping mat and covers the back of his head with a pillow as he used to do when he was child, hoping that by the time he wakes up, an answer will be ready for him.

The house is dark and quiet when he wakes up. He lies with his eyes open for a while and gets out of his bed. When he comes into the living room, his mother is sewing buttons on his shirt. She looks at him and goes back to her sewing.

"Mom, did Yishan come?"

"She did, but I didn't want to wake you. She stayed for a while and left."

"Did she go home? I need to go and see her."

His mother puts down the shirt and raises her head to look at him. The light above her accentuates all the wrinkles on her face and the almost completely gray hair on her temples. The flesh below her ears droops, pulling down the corners of her mouth. The way she looks almost makes Tianlei think she is trying to suppress her tears. Squatting down beside her, he says, "Mom, you are unhappy about my decision to stay, right?"

"Tell me, Tianlei, if Yishan isn't going to marry you, do you think you can be happy staying here?" she asks, still

gazing at him.

"Did she say she won't?"

"Your father told her what you had decided. She didn't respond. Then he went to her home with her."

"What was the expression on her face when she heard that?"

"It's hard to describe. Disbelief, I guess. Have you promised her you would both go back in September?"

Have I? he asks himself. All he remembers is he once spent an enjoyable evening with her and they talked for a long time. Did he promise her anything? He can no longer be sure.

"You were not like this when you were young," his mother says. "As far as I can remember, you always kept your promises. But now you change your mind all the time and never seem to be able to decide. Haven't I told you many times before: do not make a promise unless you intend to keep it? It's not just a matter of credit; it's also a test of your character. The most important quality of a man is his decisiveness. You still remember this, don't you?"

"Yes," he replies. A man may enhance his will power through life, but he may also lose it completely. His courage to go on has earned him a Ph.D., a college teaching position, and the pride that comes with them. But where is it now?

"You have made a promise to Yishan, haven't you?" his mother asks.

He nods.



"And you've also discussed marriage with her, right?"

"Yes, and I won't back out on that." Standing up, he adds, "I'm going over to her place now. I'll try to explain to her."

"I think it would be better not to go now so she can have a chance to think it over. Besides, your father is already there. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. Tianmei called. I told her what you had decided. She said she's coming up tomorrow morning."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

When Tianlei's father returns home later that evening, his face is gloomy, and Tianlei cannot get up the courage to ask what the Chens' response was. Without a word to him, his father asks his mother to go to their room. After a long while, his mother comes out and asks him to go to bed, adding that if he wants to talk they can do it in the morning. Tianlei, though desperately curious, returns to his room and lies in bed feeling restless. When the house is completely quiet, he sneaks out, locks the door, and rides his bicycle toward where Benevolence Boulevard, Lianyun Street, and Linyi Street intersect. The entire Chen residence, except Yishan's room, is dark. While he circles around the block, he wants to throw a little stone at Yishan's window to catch her attention, but does not have the courage to.

When he dated Meili in college, they also had occasional fights, and afterwards he would ride his bike to her house. The wall surrounding her house was not very high, so he would stand on the seat of his bike and look into the yard at her room. Once at a party in a classmate's house, Meili danced several times with a law student, and that made Tianlei very angry. When he took her home on his bike, he gave her the silent treatment all the way, and when she jumped off in front of her house, he rode away as quickly as he could. He heard Meili shout in the background but he simply laughed and said

to himself "It serves you right." But as soon as he got home, he started to regret what he had done, realizing he had acted like a total jerk. He wondered if Meili had fallen and scratched herself when she jumped off his bike. Feeling guilty, he went back to her home, but didn't dare to go in, so he laid his bike against the wall and stood on the seat. The light in her room was still on. He loudly whispered her name a couple of times, but there was no response. He jumped off his bike, picked up a couple of small stones and threw them at her window. She opened the window and was surprised to find Tianlei's head above the wall. Still angry, she shut the window with a bang. He waited outside for quite some time and then decided to climb over the glass-spiked wall. He knocked on her window, and she opened it.

"Are you crazy?" she said.

"Meili, please let me in. Just for a minute. I need to explain something to you."

She did not answer. Instead, she went to the closet to change to her pajamas. Because she forgot to turn off the light, he got his first intimate glimpse of her. His palms began to perspire and he had not the least intention of leaving.

Knocking on the window again, he said, "Please, I'm only going to stay for a second."

"You are crazy!"

"Meili, I beg you."

"Why don't we talk in school tomorrow?"

"No, I can't wait."

"Why?"

"Because I might be hit by a car on my way back, and I'll never be able to say it to you." He knew she was superstitious.

"Don't try to scare me. It's no use," she said, but her tone softened considerably.

"Just a few words with you and I'm gone. I mean it."

Meili finally let him crawl inside. They talked for a long time, and then he touched and kissed her. Either because he was not bold enough or she was too conservative, nothing further happened between them that night. A few years later when he learned Meili had got married, he wondered what would have happened if he had spent the night with her. Even if she had not become pregnant, he would have been morally obligated to her and would not have left her behind to go to the United States. Perhaps he would have, like his friend Pingtian Zhang, found a job at a local newspaper, had several children, and lived a simple but not at all unpleasant life.

Crossing one simple boundary, one could be in a completely different world.

After that night, he kept going over to her place each time they had a fight, not because he felt obligated to apologize to her but because he wanted to be close to her again. But no matter how hard he tried, Meili never opened her window

again. After several attempts, he gave up the idea. But when he saw her in school the next day, he would say to her, "Why are you so stubborn? You'll have to let me in sooner or later."

As he circles around Yishan's house, he wants to see her and talk to her, but he no longer has the courage to throw stones at a window. Being with Yishan, he has realized, is different from being with Meili. When he and Meili were together, they could enjoy each other's company, then have a foolish fight, and then make up with a flurry of hugs and kisses; but with Yishan, he more or less feels like an adult trying to please a child. He loves Yishan, too, but not in the same way.

After strolling back and forth around Yishan's house, he finally decides to go home. Around Dengmending at this hour, all he sees is a few dough twist stands scattered along the street, and all he hears is the melodious sound of masseurs as they try to attract customers with their flutes. The music brings back memories of the past and regrets over all that has been lost forever. Nothing has ever made him feel quite so empty, helpless, and lost.

His father has left home by the time he is up the next morning. His mother has had breakfast and is going out to do the grocery shopping. She asks him to go to the train station at eleven to meet Tianmei. He sits down in the living room, eats breakfast, and reads a newspaper while waiting. In the

thirty-odd years of his life, he has spent many hours waiting, most of which passed aimlessly. How many times has he grieved over such irrecoverable losses! During the years he was in America, he read all sections of his Chinese newspaper every day to fight his homesickness, and the more he read, the more he missed home. He can even remember the contents of each section. The front page always carries pleasant, encouraging news. The second page is filled with reports of suicide, murder, and other social crimes. He has read similar stories in American newspapers as well, but he soon forgets them; after all, they are not about his own country or his own people. The third page is always gossip about movie stars and other celebrities, and it is forever written in the most worldly fashion. The final page, which used to be his favorite one when he was a student, is the literary section. He no longer reads this section, but to kill time, he is reading every word on the page, although he does not retain any of it.

The phone rings. He leaps from the couch to pick it up.

"Is this Yishan?"

"No. What's the matter with you, Tianlei?"

He blinks and realizes it is his sister. "Hi, Tianmei, where are you?"

"At the train station, of course. Why aren't you here to pick me up? I've waited for almost twenty minutes already. You don't need to come now. I'll take a cab home."

At lunch time, his father still isn't back. Unable to wait any longer, he asks his mother, "What did Dad say when he came home last night?"

"He said the Chens were really disappointed. I don't know if you can blame them," she says as she spoons some chicken into Tianmei's bowl.

"I don't have the least intention of blaming them," says Tianlei. "I was just curious what they were going to do."

"Yishan's parents couldn't decide for her, so she'll have to make a decision herself."

"So, what did she say? Did Dad tell you?"

His mother does not answer, and Tianmei says, "Mom just told me that when Yishan got home, the Mo brothers were waiting for her, so she went out with them."

"Why are you so gossipy, Tianmei? Your brother doesn't own Yishan or anything, so she's free to go out with anyone she wants to."

"I didn't say she shouldn't do that." Tianmei smiles. "I just thought it was such a strange coincidence that they took her out yesterday. I wonder if she's been going out with them regularly. If that's the case, it's not fair for Tianlei because she does it behind his back."

"Well, Tianlei hasn't given her any time lately. If I were Yishan, I wouldn't be happy, either."

"But she knows why Tianlei has been busy."

"What time did she go home?" Tianlei asks.

"I don't know," his mother says. "By the time your father left, she hadn't returned. Her parents said your decision came so suddenly that they were totally unprepared. They didn't want you to see Yishan again right away so she can have some time to think about the whole thing."

"What is there to think about? There are men that want to marry her right now. All she needs to do is say yes to one of them and then she can pack up for her golden country. See if I care."

His mother peeks at him and says nothing. After lunch, Tianlei asks his sister to go out with him. Before he leaves, he asks his mother, "Have the announcements been sent out yet?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because if they haven't, then don't. If they have, we'll have to print a retraction in the paper or notify people somehow."

"That you don't have to worry about. Your father and I will take care of it."

Tianlei and his sister take a taxi and head toward Yangming Mountains. It is Tianlei's first time there since his return. The scenery seems quite different to him now: the trees have grown and the bright-red gazebos appear out of place. The place is still rather quiet, perhaps because it is a weekday. They rest in a tea house on the mountain overlooking a fountain, bare cherry trees, and dry grass. Some families are



having picnics under the trees; some bend over by the narrow roadside taking pictures while others wearing straw hats stand on the grass looking around.

"Look at that man over there," says Tianlei to his sister. "He looks at everything with so much curiosity. I'm sure he's never been here before."

"Probably. It's nothing strange to me, though. I know a lady in Tainan who's in her seventies. She's never even been to Taipei. Can you believe it?"

"Sure I can. When I was a student in Berkeley, Illinois, I knew quite a few people who had never been to Chicago although they lived only twenty minutes away, not to mention New York."

"I wonder if they wanted to go."

Shaking his head, he says, "I don't think they did. One man told me if he ever visited a place like New York, he probably wouldn't want to go back to where he was, so he would rather not go. If he didn't see any other place, he wouldn't feel anything was lacking in his life."

"That sounds reasonable," says Tianmei. "That's probably why I don't want to go to the united States. I never stopped to think about it that way."

"I think it's a good thing for a person to see some different places. Curiosity is a basic human desire."

"You're right, but for me, family is my first priority right now. Since I know I won't get to travel anywhere, I

don't even think about it." Then, in a half-joking tone, she adds, "So Yishan can't really be blamed for wanting to go to the United States, can she?"

"I've never blamed her for that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I've already told you: I have accepted a position here. If that means I have to lose her, then so be it. Besides, she can go there without me anyway."

"That's not what I meant. I was thinking about you. Will you be happy without her?"

"What choice do I have?"

"Do you think you can convince her to stay with you?"

He sips tea for quite some time and says, "The question is not whether or not I can convince her; it is whether she can understand why I do what I do."

"I thought you had said people couldn't possibly understand each other in every way."

"Well, she only needs to understand one thing. That's all."

"So, you don't really want to give up on her, do you?"

He shakes his head and says, "It's not up to me."

"Of course it is." Tianmei raises her voice. "The key is how you approach the situation. If you choose to deal with it actively, then you should talk to her openly and let her know how you really feel and explain to her that you need her and want her support. This is not a matter of whether or not

it's worth the effort. The truth is you love her and want to be with her, so she's worth fighting for. Am I not right? Why in the world would you want to push her away to that Mo guy?"

"If she loves me, how can she possibly be pushed away so easily?"

"Tianlei, you have to understand she may be in love with you--that I can see--but she wants to go to the United States more than anything else; that also is a fact."

"So?"

"So if you think her wanting to go to the United States is totally unreasonable, you can forget about her. But if you don't think it's her fault, and that she's simply following the trend, then you shouldn't push her away."

Pausing, Tianlei says, "Tell me, what's your true opinion of her?"

"What does that have to do with anything? To tell you the truth, I'm not too impressed with her. I don't even think she is for you. But I also don't think she is a bad person. Whether or not you two belong together, that's something only the two of you can decide. Others can't. But one thing I can tell is you don't want to lose her."

Putting out the cigarette he has just lighted, he stands up and says, "Can we please not talk about this? What's the use of discussing a problem that can't be solved?"

After a walk on the mountain, they take a bus to go down.

Tianlei suggests they stop by Qinglong Cafe on their way back. That's where he and Yishan went on their first date. At that time he didn't care for the atmosphere there at all, but after living in Taiwan for two months, he knows there are lots of cafes worse than that. Qinglong is fairly quiet today. On the second floor, an older man dozes off in a corner seat while Ravel's "Pavane for a Dead Princess" is played. Tianlei orders two glasses of iced coffee for himself. Before Tianmei's soda arrives, he has already emptied both cups. Seeing her brother's knit brows, Tianmei wants to laugh but keeps her lips on the straw for fear of provoking him. As soon as she finishes, he stands up, and she follows him out. Afterwards they go to see a movie, and by the time they leave the theater, the temperature has cooled. He wants to call their parents and let them know they'll eat outside and then go home.

When his father answers the phone, he at first wants to know if his father went to Yishan's house again this morning. But hearing the cool tone of his voice, he decides not to. "Has anyone called for me?"

"Who are you expecting a call from?" his father says.

"No one in particular. I thought maybe someone from the university or perhaps Pingtian Zhang might have called. I've promised Pingtian we'll get together after I'm done with Mr. Chiu's affairs."

"Oh, no one has called." His father then asks to speak

with Tianmei. As she listens and says "all right" now and then, he wonders whether his father is telling her about the Chens. As soon as she hangs up, he asks her what their father has said.

"Not much. He wanted us to pick a clean restaurant and said we didn't have to rush home. He said you've been so busy lately you should relax now. He suggested we go to Ximengding after we eat. He'll stay up for us."

"That's all?"

Tianmei knows what he is fishing for but pretends to be unaware. "What else did you expect to hear?" she says with a smile. "Come on, let's go to Louwailou for supper. Then we can go to New World next door to see a Taiwanese movie."

"The movie part I can do without," he says as he shakes his head. "Call me what you like--unpatriotic, a bogus Westerner, anything--but I'm not going to a Taiwanese movie. When I was in America, I didn't even care to see Hollywood movies."

"I'm not sure if the movies are all that bad," says Tianmei. "I think your mind is too unsettled."

Once they are seated in Louwailou, Tianlei starts to order: steamed stuffed buns, fried tofu, noodles with pork sauce, fried pork with preserved vegetables.... He tastes a little of each, and since Tianmei isn't very hungry, either, they have quite a bit left over when they have finished. As they drink tea, Tianmei asks him where he wants to go next.

"How about going to Yishan's home with me once?" he asks after a moment of hesitation.

Tianmei shakes her head. "No. I think you should go by yourself."

He lights up the last cigarette in the pack and squeezes the wrapping into a ball, rolling it back and forth on the table. After a few rounds, the ball loosens up and stops rolling. He picks it up, clenches it in his fist, and then rolls it on the table with his palm. The edges are gradually smoothed off and it becomes round. Tianmei takes it from him, pulls out the tin foil inside, and flattens it on the table. She then wraps the paper ball in the foil sheet, squeezes into a ball, and puts it back in his hand.

"There, it should be firm now."

"You only need to walk me to her house."

"What are you afraid of?" Tianmei becomes a little impatient. He does not respond, and she continues, "Dad just told me Mo somehow had heard you were not returning to the States this fall and that there was some conflict between you and Yishan. The guy went over to Yishan's house this morning and took her to Yeliu. He even proposed to her."

The cigarette butt is close to burning his fingers. Tianmei takes it from him and extinguishes it in the ashtray.

"And she. . . ."

"Dad has just got back from her house. Her father laid all the cards on the table: Yishan's mother isn't terribly

impressed with Mo's personality or his manners and thinks you are a lot more reliable. Yishan's father said Mo wasn't such a bad guy. He just didn't want to create the impression that he would give her daughter away to anyone who could take her to the United States. But he also said Mo's field of studies had much greater opportunity than yours. Dad was angry because he thought Yishan's father was too practical and was totally disregarding their long friendship. He said he was going to rest his case now."

"What did Yishan say?"

"Who knows? Dad didn't say."

Tianlei, feeling dry in his throat, calls to the waiter for some tea. When his tea arrives, he says bluntly to the waiter, "I think you put too much salt in your food." The waiter grumbles as he leaves the table. Once out of the cafe, they see many people on the street, men in wooden clogs and funny-looking shorts, women in silk dresses holding a package in one hand and holding their children's hands with the other. Some wave fans as they walk, and some walk their bicycles. The weather and noise make Tianlei sweat again.

"I wonder why so many people are out," says Tianlei to his sister. "Don't kids go to bed early anymore?"

"Don't put on the lofty air, all right?" Tianlei says half-jokingly. "Some families have seven or eight people sleeping on bunk beds in one room. How can they stay inside in this kind of weather? You've only been back for two

months, so you may not have gotten used to seeing so many people around, but you will once you've been here a while."

"With so many people and such hot weather, I'm not sure if I still want to stay."

She stops, standing in the middle of the vast flowing crowd. "Tianlei, if you want to go back because of Yishan, that's certainly understandable, but I don't want to hear you finding other excuses simply to make yourself feel better." Then, with a serious look, she adds, "What's really bothering you? You weren't like this before."

He turns and waves to the pedicab across the street. On their way home, neither speaks a word. When they come into the yard, their parents are sitting on the porch in deep thought, their faces barely visible from the streetlight outside. Their mother fans herself slowly while their father puffs lightly on his cigar, the smoke rising and disappearing into the darkness. Some insects are chirping in the yard, and in the distance an occasional bark can be heard.

"You two have come back early," their mother says.

"Tianlei couldn't stand the crowd and didn't want to see a movie, either," says Tianmei as she heads for her room.

"What did you have for supper?" Tianlei's mother asks him.

He names a few dishes and sits on the floor next to her. He feels his pocket and realizes he is out of cigarettes. A little nervous at his father's silence, he screws up his courage and says to him, "Dad, have you seen Yishan today?"



Afraid that his father might deny it, he quickly adds, "Tianmei has already told me."

"She is such a gossip," his father exclaims. "She can never keep anything to herself!" Taking a couple of puffs on his cigar, he adds, "Since you already know I've been there, I might as well tell you the whole story. I doubt there's much chance left between you and Yishan. I was just talking about this with your mother. We can't really blame them because we are the ones that have shattered their hopes. Now since somebody else can do the same thing for her, naturally she will grab the chance. Even though I didn't speak with Yishan directly today, I can tell how she thinks from her parents."

"You think her parents could speak for her?"

"She does listen to her parents after all," Tianlei's mother cuts in.

A little annoyed by the implication, he says, "Listening to her parents is one thing, but letting them interfere with major decisions of her life is something else. I don't think she would marry just anybody who can take her to the United States. She's told me she has absolutely no interest in Mo, to say nothing of love."

"But she's gone out with him several times," his mother says.

"Tianlei, I've opposed your staying in Taiwan from the very beginning." His father begins to raise his voice. "Since you

are over thirty now, you naturally should decide on such things yourself. When I asked you the other day what you would do if your staying here meant losing her, you said 'so be it.' If that's the case, why can't you forget about her? I've already made several trips to the Chens in the past couple of days, but if they really don't want to go along with your plan, why should we keep putting pressure on them? Fragrant flowers are in every corner of the world; you said it yourself, didn't you?"

"Mom, her going out with Mo doesn't necessarily mean she will marry him," says Tianmei, who has come out in a different dress. "Maybe she just wanted to make Tianlei a little jealous." She sits leaning against her mother.

"Has she said anything about this to her parents?" Tianlei asks.

"How could I ask?" His father's patience is running short.

"Why don't you let Tianlei go to Yishan and ask her himself?" says Tianmei. "If he finds out she no longer wants him, then he can forget the whole thing completely. What's the use for us to sit here and guess?"

"I think it would be wise of him not to go and make a total fool of himself. If she doesn't come, she's already made it clear."

"That's nonsense, Dad, . . ."

"Watch your tongue." Her mother taps her head. "How could you talk to your father like that?"

"What I meant was Dad had no idea about how a woman thinks. You see, after Tianlei changed his plans, even if she still wanted to marry him, she had no way of letting him know, so I think he should go and talk to her; ask her himself. I'm a woman, so I know what a woman would think. Besides, I do know Yishan better than all of you."

"Tianmei has a point," says her mother. "I think we should let him go."

Seeing his father not respond, Tianlei remains seated.

"Let's get moving," says Tianmei, "I'm going to ask Ah-cui to give Yishan a call and let her know you are coming. She'll be waiting for you."

Tianlei, glad and grateful but at the same time embarrassed and afraid, pinches his sister's cheek. "You always come up with the darndest ideas!"

"On that account alone you should not be discouraged," says Tianmei. "Go on now, Ah-cui will have the bike ready for you."

A firefly zooms past Tianlei and lights up his face. Slowly he rises while everyone's eyes are on him. He scans each face and goes to the door to put on his shoes, and, without fastening his shoelaces, walks out of the yard with his bike. As he gets on, Tianmei calls to him from behind, "Good luck to you!"

The weather has cooled down considerably. With one hand on the handlebar and the other in his pants pocket, he rides

past huge palm trees on Benevolence Boulevard, whistling as he heads toward Yishan's home. He feels something round and hard in his pocket. Taking it out, he sees it is the cigarette package that his sister has made into a ball for him. He grips it in his hand and continues on his way.

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